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**ELIZABETH DENBY, HOUSING CONSULTANT:
SOCIAL REFORM AND CULTURAL POLITICS
IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD**

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers an account and interpretation of the work and life of the housing consultant Elizabeth Denby (1894-1965).

The main focus of the thesis is on Denby's life between 1894 and 1939. In Part One, her career is traced from 1894 to her work in the voluntary housing sector in north Kensington, London, between 1923 and 1933, the year she launched her career as a housing consultant. In Part Two, her work as a consultant is discussed through an examination of her work on three major housing projects: R.E.Sassoon House (1934); Kensal House (1937) and the All-Europe House (1936-1939) and associated projects including the series of New Homes for Old Exhibitions (1931-1936); the campaign for design reform and her book *Europe Rehoused* (1938). A short postscript discusses her career after 1939 and the conclusion considers her influence within the inter-war period and subsequently.

As well as offering the first substantial historical account of a figure who played an important and influential part in inter-war debates about social housing and cultural politics, the thesis has two further aims. First, to show how Denby epitomises the way women had a significant influence over the creation of the built environment - especially social housing - for much of the twentieth century. Second, to locate the philosophy of social welfare she practised within the tradition of thought associated with the British Idealist movement and its influence on the work of the British voluntary social welfare sector. It is suggested that it was this sector -

particularly its women members like Denby - which generated many of the most innovative ideas about social welfare during the inter-war years, concepts which would ultimately have considerable influence in the immediate post-war years.

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NOTES ON THE TEXT

Abbreviations used in text, footnotes & bibliography

ABN: Architect and Building News

AJ: Architects Journal

AR: Architectural Review

ARec: Architectural Record

B: The Builder

BAL: British Architectural Library

BMJ: British Medical Journal

CIAM: Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne

DP: Denby Papers

ED: Elizabeth Denby

JRIBA: Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects

SSR: The Social Service Review

TLS: Times Literary Supplement

Illustrations

All illustrations, except frontispieces which are referred to by a letter, are referred to by numbers in square brackets in the text. They are bound in at the end of each chapter.

Italics

All italics used in quotations are original unless noted otherwise.



A: Elizabeth Denby in the 1930s

INTRODUCTION

...In our little world Miss Denby...wields more influence - and gets more done - than any six pompous or prating males¹

...in electing Elizabeth Denby to be Honorary Associate, the RIBA has conferred well-deserved recognition on one who occupies a unique position in the architecture world. Her experience in flat management and her researches abroad, which were embodied in her remarkable book *Europe Rehoused*, have enabled her to make important contributions to a number of housing schemes. Elizabeth Denby is the star in the profession she invented for herself, "Consultant in Low-Rental Housing"²

Thus wrote the *Architects' Journal* about the subject of this thesis, Elizabeth Denby. Written when she was at her most active and most well-known, the comments indicate the esteem in which she was held and the considerable space she occupied in the world of housing and architecture before 1945. Today, a mention of her name will invariably lead to a nod of recognition and perhaps a mention of *Europe Rehoused* or the other work which which she is most associated, Kensal House, the block of model flats at Ladbroke Grove of 1937. She is probably the best known of the women who were active in the world of design and social reform during the 1930s; her name is to be found in most books on the period, usually in conjunction with that of E.Maxwell (Max) Fry with whom she collaborated on Kensal House.³ But how much is known about this person whom as the quotations I have taken from the *AJ* suggest, was much admired in her lifetime?

¹ Astragal (1936).

² *AJ* (1942).

³ David Dean, for example, mentions her as Fry's collaborator on Sassoon House and lists her as consultant at Kensal House, though he does not include her in the caption for the illustration of Kensal House. See Dean (1983), 62 and plate 64.

Though many have mentioned Denby, few have attempted an analysis of what she did. She is most commonly mentioned in passing and awarded varying job descriptions. Lionel Esher speaks of her as '...the most level headed of the housing experts of the thirties...';⁴ Judy Attfield describes her as 'an influential adviser on working class housing',⁵ whilst others call her a 'journalist',⁶ or 'housing reformer'.⁷ Those who have treated her as more than a name to be mentioned have not gone far in their attempts at analysis. The most common approach is to place her into the category of middle-class do-gooders. Lubbock categorises her amongst those who sought to tyrannise the working classes in the 1930s with the imposition of good design in their homes,⁸ an interpretation shared by Jonathan Woodham.⁹

So, rather curiously, despite the familiarity of her name and the relative frequency of its presence in the historical record, we actually know very little about who or what Denby was. There exists no attempt to look at her work in detail,¹⁰ nor any attempt to consider why a woman might have

⁴ Esher (1981), 28.

⁵ Attfield (1989), 217.

⁶ Boydell (1989), 63.

⁷ Glendinning & Muthesius (1994), 2.

⁸ Lubbock (1995), 299.

⁹ Woodham (1994), *passim*.

¹⁰ In fact, there was one attempt to produce a biography of Denby, called *Housing Matters*, but it never came to fruition. Amongst ED's papers are some typescripts prepared by a Mrs Phyllis Allen in 1975 with assistance from the architect Edward Hollamby. One is an annotated copy of a brief autobiographical sketch by Denby called 'My Apprenticeship', the other an annotated bibliography of Denby's writings (DP 11 67 75). No book was produced and I have been unable to trace Mrs Allen. Hollamby, correspondence July 1995, recalls some discussions on a book but no further outcome. There is also a note amongst the indexes to the papers from Allen which mentions 'her obligation to make something of Miss Denby's miscellaneous drafts...'; quite what these drafts were is unclear, only the 'Apprenticeship' draft is now to be found amongst Denby's papers.

invented the role of housing consultant in Britain in the 1930s.¹¹

THE AIM OF THE THESIS

This, then, is the task I have set myself in this thesis. It is my intention to offer the first substantial account and interpretation of the work and life of Elizabeth Denby. In so doing my primary concern will not be, though this may be the expectation, to write a purely biographical study of Denby. I take this stance partly out of necessity but also from conviction. Denby seems to have been determined to destroy any clues that might have allowed historians to construct a history of both her personal and professional life. It was her wish, and it was carried out, that all her personal papers be destroyed after her death.¹² Thus the conventional means by which a biographer might reconstruct her subject are not available. Her papers, such as they are, consist of books, plans and drawings, some notes and a vast array of newspaper cuttings.¹³ The only material of a personal nature which has survived is a short autobiography, a few letters, one speech, and an entry in *Who's Who*. As documents prepared for public consumption they are not without interest for they reveal how Denby wished to be perceived, but from them, as will be seen, Denby excised much of her past. Denby has, then, left her historian to fill in the gaps in the archives, to write '... in, on or around the gaps'.¹⁴

¹¹ Denby gave her profession various names. For consistency I shall keep to the phrase 'housing consultant' throughout this thesis.

¹² Allen (1995).

¹³ She left her papers to the Building Research Establishment at Watford; an interesting choice perhaps suggesting her belief in the importance of her work.

¹⁴ I borrow here from Colomina (1996), 1 and her description of the position she was forced to adopt in her study of Adolf Loos who, like, Denby destroyed all traces of his personal life.

THE APPROACH OF THIS THESIS

Even if this had not been the case and there existed diaries, letters and memoirs, I would have eschewed a solely biographical approach to my subject. In this thesis, I want to avoid what Michael Freeden has called 'the individualistic fallacy' which '...overstresses the function of a particular individual as the creator of a system...'.¹⁵ My concern is not to privilege Denby's approach to the reform of the built environment and attribute to her all innovative thinking on the subject in the inter-war years. Rather, and to borrow again from Freeden, I want to suggest her role as a key individual within a particular historical group and time but also acknowledge that '...equally striking are the social contexts in which [the individual] operated, how they met, what they discussed'.¹⁶

So at the same time as I shall document Denby's life and work I shall also seek to locate Denby '...within the dual contexts of the people and ideas that intersect[ed] with...[her] thoughts and deeds...', from the voluntary sector in which she trained and worked in the 1910s and 1920s to the modernist architectural groups with which she was associated in the 1930s and 1940s. It is the suggestion here that it was Denby's association with such groupings and activities which allowed her to exert influence for, as Freeden argues, the '...constant interaction among individuals may point to the existence of regularities of thinking reinforced by that very interaction'.¹⁷ This is true of both the historical moment in which Denby operated and the act of writing history: reconstructing those regularities reveals much about the processes of which Denby formed part.

¹⁵ Freeden (1990), 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

This thesis will, then, comprise a biographical element to the extent that I shall give dates of birth and death, list her main activities and so forth but I shall endeavour not to reduce my explanation of what Denby did to her personal temperament but to the spaces which she occupied and the people and discourses with whom she interacted as an individual. It is the regularities of thinking as much as Denby herself which are the subject of this thesis.

This approach means that my study of Denby allows me to say much about her activities but, perhaps more importantly, also to contribute to our understanding of some aspects of twentieth-century British social history, two in particular. First my study is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which women have participated in and contributed to the creation of the built environment in Britain for much of this century. Second, it enables me to work towards a revision of our understanding of the factors, institutions and people which influenced the formation of housing and cultural policy by the British state in the period between c.1930 and 1950.

In doing this, I place my work in the context of broader developments in the historiography of architectural and social history which have taken place over the past twenty years. In the field of architectural history, especially in North America, historians have increasingly turned their attention to an exploration of the way women have influenced the shaping of the built environment. Dolores Hayden's pioneering study, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, has established some valuable principles for departure, especially in her recognition that it was not as architects but

as writers, reformers and social workers that women changed our environment.¹⁸ More recently Alice Friedman's work has shown the role played by women clients in the shaping of architecture.¹⁹ My work on Denby forms part of this new tradition and will, I hope, demonstrate that such processes were equally important in a British context.

Recent developments in social history have also directed my study. The work of historians like Daunton, Harris and Lewis has reinterpreted the institutions, and individuals, which influenced the formation of social welfare policy and practice in twentieth-century Britain.²⁰ They acknowledge the significance of the transformation of welfare provision from an essentially private, voluntary and amateur practice at the beginning of the century to a professionalised and nationalised one by the late 1940s, a process with which the Webbs are most associated.

Nevertheless, their concern has been less with an explanation of the genesis of the institutions of welfare provision and more with offering an understanding of the philosophies underlying the type of welfare provided by these new state bodies. Their work has shown that although the voluntary sector as a *provider* of welfare was marginalised during the first half of the century its philosophy of social welfare, which derived from the work of British Idealists such as T.H.Green, underpinned many of the policies and practices which were absorbed into state welfare work and ultimately the post-war Welfare State. Hitherto, however, there has been little concentration on how this process was enacted in the field of social housing, an omission^{which} my study of Denby allows me to amend.

¹⁸ See Hayden (1981).

¹⁹ Friedman (1998).

²⁰ See Daunton (1996), Harris (1989/1992), Lewis (1996).

A related aspect of this revisionist work, and one which has also influenced my work, has been the reinsertion of women into the history of the development of social theory. Lewis' work is most important here as is the work of North American scholars like Martha Vicinus and Deborah Epstein Nord who have shown the ways women in the late-nineteenth century took a leading role in debates about the nature of the reform of the built environment both in the UK and the US.²¹ It is again my hope that my study of Denby will contribute to this growing area of study.

In bringing together historiographical developments from architectural and social history it is my intention not simply to produce a more complete understanding of Denby's work but also to demonstrate a type of architectural history which I feel should be practised more widely. Rather than seeing architectural history as a branch of practice or theory, I want to reassert it as a branch of (social) history. This is not a new endeavour. It is something the historian Deborah Wiener achieved admirably in her discussion of the settlement movement's use of architecture but it is one that has perhaps lost ground in recent years in the face of more theoretical approaches to our subject.²² It is my wish to contribute to the body of knowledge about the twentieth-century built environment rather than pursue an elliptical reading of a particular building. In this study, empirical research, extensive use of archival sources, a thorough reading of contemporary texts on the subjects with which Denby was involved, alongside more modern concerns about the representational nature of buildings and space are combined to produce what I hope is new

²¹ See Lewis (1991/1996), Vicinus (1985), Nord (1995).

²² Wiener (1994).

knowledge and a new - or rather the first in-depth - interpretation of Denby's work. In developing this approach I have had much help from my subject. The many spaces she occupied, her refusal to be categorised and the range of her interests have all encouraged me to pursue a cross-disciplinary approach to my study and have led me to a better understanding of the many discourses which make up the built environment.

SCOPE OF STUDY

The fact that no major study of Denby existed when I began my research has meant two things. First I have not had, to any significant degree, an existing epistemology to react against. I have had to construct a way of seeing Denby from scratch. In so doing I am well aware that it will now be ripe for revision. The lack of a major study also meant that at the outset of my research I had no clear idea of what the scope of my study would be. It quickly became apparent that Denby was active in many more spheres than the existing historical record showed. At times it seemed that Denby could be found participating in any campaign against anything in the thirties. She wrote, campaigned and practised in areas as diverse as health reform, design reform, the demand for smokeless fuels, town and country planning as well as housing. It is a testament to her character that she did so much, but it would have been impossible to provide an account of all this work in this thesis and at the same time produce anything but a descriptive catalogue.

I decided, therefore, to focus on her work in housing, ^{for} after all she did call herself a housing consultant. It was in housing that she learnt her trade -

working for the voluntary housing sector in the 1920s - and in the 1930s, when she worked independently, housing was the umbrella under which, and often through which, she pursued her other interests. I then elected to divide my discussion into two sections. In Part One, I consider Denby's life and work from her birth to the year when she decided to become a housing consultant. My concern is to establish a genealogy of the housing consultant and to show the spaces from which this figure emerged. A particular area of focus in this discussion will be the voluntary housing sector, the only arena which allowed women to enter public policy debate on housing in the first half of the twentieth century. I shall also spend some time in a discussion of the social philosophy this sector practised since it had an enormous influence on Denby's work throughout her life.

In Part Two, I then focus on Denby's work as a consultant. I shall explore in detail the three major housing projects on which she worked between 1933 and 1939 and the different aspects of her interests which they allowed her to pursue. In her first scheme, R.E.Sassoon House, she combined her interest in the reformed dwelling with her interest in progressive forms of health care by collaborating with the doctors who ran the Pioneer Health Centre. At Kensal House she sought to facilitate the development of citizenship amongst the working classes as well as pursuing sub-themes such as the provision of cheap well-designed furniture for the tenants, the reform of nursery education and the use of smokeless fuels. Her final scheme, the All-Europe House, was an exercise in modern dwelling design but also an attempt to promote a model for urban replanning. I end my discussion in 1939, the date which marks the end of her most active work in housing reform. I do include, however, a brief postscript which outlines

her career from then until her death in 1965.

It is my hope that the work I present here, though it may say very little about who Denby was as an individual, will reveal much about what she did, why she did it and the historical processes of which her work formed part.

PART ONE
BECOMING ELIZABETH DENBY
1894-1933



B: Elizabeth Denby at an ILP Summer School, c.1924

CHAPTER ONE
BECOMING ELIZABETH DENBY
1894-1923

Elizabeth Denby was born Elsie Marian Denby in Bradford in 1894. Her father Walter was a doctor and her mother Clara had been a nurse. She was their second daughter; in addition the family comprised an older sister Dorothy and two younger, Eileen and Joyce. These are virtually the only facts which can be stated with any certainty about Denby's early years for there are no papers, other than a few pieces of autobiographical writing, which might enable the reconstruction of the 'real' Elizabeth Denby. Her whole life, certainly from when she moved to London in 1916, seems to have been one of constant self-reinvention and evasion. In a sense there are several Elizabeth Denbys, each mutating according to where she was and the opportunities available to her. Since this is the case, the focus of this chapter will not be to try and present the 'original' Denby from which the others emerged, rather the concern is to explore the circumstances around her as she grew up, in order to suggest a genealogy for her invention of the housing consultant.

This approach brings to light two particular themes. The first is that in order to understand and explain what Denby became, her development should be contextualised within the huge upheavals which the lives of upper and middle-class women had undergone during the second half of the nineteenth century. It becomes apparent that it was Denby's great fortune to be born and grow up at a time when the opening up of

education and work to women of her class had become normalised and the notion that women deserved a certain independence and freedom, at least until their marriage, also accepted. At the same time, Denby's date of birth can also be seen as something of a misfortune for it meant that she would be too old to benefit from some of the second wave of reforms and influences which were subsequent to these pioneer decades of women's emancipation. The choices available to Denby when she left school in 1913 were very different from those for her equivalent leaving school as few as six years later. The type of work which it would have been acceptable for Denby to pursue before the First World War was firmly prescribed by the notion that ladies should work only in areas for which their femininity was best suited. After the war, though such concepts remained, the removal (legally if not ideologically) of sex bars by the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 meant that careers and professions more commonly seen as 'masculine', such as architecture, engineering and surveying, became open to women, by which time Denby had already begun a career.

Secondly, it would seem that Denby's background, despite her desire to separate herself from her roots, physically by moving to London and symbolically by re-naming herself Elizabeth, most probably had some influence.¹ In her few pieces of autobiographical writings there are some hints that this was so. In an un-dated text Denby observed 'My interest in housing - that is bad housing - dormant since my childhood, became my business when in 1926 I was appointed to become the first Organising

¹She did, when it suited her, choose to refer to her background. From the late 1930s she often made a point of defining herself as a 'Yorkshire Woman' to stress her practical, no-nonsense approach to housing.

Secretary of the Kensington Housing Association...'.² Shortly before her death she wrote 'I always knew that I was intended to champion the poor in housing and allied things'.³ Although such statements may ultimately be best understood as part of the narrative account which Denby created of her own life, they do suggest a lifelong commitment to socially useful work. The reconstruction of her early life and schooling, in so far as it has been possible, suggests a background which would have encouraged a social conscience and desire to 'do good'. At a broader level her home town, which boasted one of the most progressive political and social cultures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one in which women were politically active, helps reinforce the idea that her background may have influenced her more than she liked to admit.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Denby's account of her early life is limited to one line 'I, ELIZABETH DENBY [sic], was brought up in a Yorkshire industrial town'.⁴ Fortunately it has been possible to create a more complete account of her origins than this. She was born at home, 95 Horton Road, and registered with the name Elsie by which she seems to have been known throughout her childhood.⁵ Until she left home Denby lived at this address in an area known as Great Horton to the west of Bradford's town centre. This was not the most fashionable area of Bradford but it was certainly respectable.⁶ So too were

² Denby Papers (DP) 'Apprenticeship in North Kensington' undated script (early 1960s?), box 11 67 75 - 11 68 20.

³ Letter from ED to Lady Elizabeth Pepler, 28.10.65 in possession of author. Lady Pepler first met ED in the late 1920s.

⁴ DP, Apprenticeship.

⁵ This is the name on her birth certificate. Additionally, references to her in her school magazine the *Bradford Girls Grammar School Chronicle* refer to her as Elsie from her first mention in 1912 to one in 1920.

⁶ James (1990) cites Manningham and Heaton as the most desirable areas of the town.

her parents, a doctor father and a mother who had been a nurse.⁷ Denby would later describe her family as 'bourgeois' however the evidence makes this seem a little harsh.⁸ It would be fairer to describe them as belonging to the professional middle classes. Moreover, in view of her mother's career and the way her parents brought up their daughter it also seems appropriate to describe them as progressive.

The career of Denby's mother provides a good example of the dichotomous nature of the emancipation of women which took place between the 1850s and the end of the century. It has been argued widely and elsewhere that in seeking to open up the world of work, civil rights and education to women, mid-century feminists had to develop a set of rationales to justify this challenge to male power.⁹ Martha Vicinus argues convincingly that the answer lay in complying with accepted definitions of women's particular skills and 'carrying the domestic world into the public world'.¹⁰ Qualities seen as inherent to women - caring, delicacy, domestic skills - could be brought to bear on public institutions thereby raising the moral tone of the country. This approach brought many freedoms however 'the price of independence was the reinforcement of sexual stereotyping'.¹¹ This was a feminism which emphasised that women should gain equality but remain different. It would not be until the early twentieth century that the re-definition of femininity itself became a focus for feminist agitation.

⁷ Correspondence with Ruth Wright, Denby's niece, Oct and November, 1995.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See, for example, Lewis (1980); Dyhouse (1981), Delamont & Duffin (1978), and Vicinus (1985).

¹⁰ Vicinus (1985), ch. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Clara Denby's chosen profession of nursing exemplifies this process. If, as seems likely,¹² she worked as a nurse during the 1880s this places her in what Vicinus has described as the pioneer age of modern nursing.¹³ This, under the initiative of Florence Nightingale, for a period of thirty years from the mid century saw the creation of a reformed nursing profession which eradicated all traces of the uneducated, mostly working-class, women who had previously worked in the field. Henceforth nursing would be promoted as an appropriate career for educated women, who would be '...single women of impeccable moral standards'.¹⁴ Women's natural skill of care and their sense of duty and service to others would be professionalised and relocated into the public sphere without disrupting, too much, conventional notions of what women could do and be.

As someone who benefited from the first wave of feminist action and reform Clara Denby would seem likely to have been a rather remarkable woman, someone who would be predisposed to encouraging her daughters to follow her example if they so wished. Her husband, Walter Denby, though he did not pursue a particularly unusual career for his day, clearly was broad-minded enough to allow his daughters to enjoy, as will be seen, an advanced education. He qualified as a Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery at Edinburgh University in 1887 and then became House-surgeon at Bradford Royal Infirmary.¹⁵ To be a doctor was a solid

¹² My assumption is that since Denby was born in 1894, and her older sister Dorothy left school two years before her, suggesting a date of birth of 1892, that the latest possible date of marriage for their parents would have been 1891. Walter Denby qualified in 1887 so it seems likely that marriage would have taken place between then and 1891. I am also assuming that she gave up nursing on her marriage.

¹³ Vicinus (1985), ch.3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁵ *British Medical Journal* (1944)

and respectable career but not one that necessarily implied a highly-developed social conscience, although his work in a voluntary hospital, the only institution to which the working-class poor had recourse during illness, would have exposed him to the extent of social need in Bradford. Walter Denby later became a General Practitioner, probably during 1894, but he did not relinquish entirely his work as a surgeon.¹⁶ Until his retirement from medicine in 1924 he acted as Honorary House Surgeon to St Catherine's Home for Cancer and Incurables. The Home was opened in 1893 following an appeal for funds by the Royal Infirmary's Samaritan Society (which looked after patients after their discharge from the hospital and was run by the doctors' wives) in view of the 'urgent need of a place where incurable cases and especially cancer could be sent'.¹⁷ Entrance to the hospital was on the premise that 'no recommendations are required save sickness and poverty...and no enquiry is made as to creed or even as to character'.¹⁸ To be associated with an organisation which was as uncritical of personal circumstance as this (an approach which was unusual for the period), implies that Denby's father was a man of some tolerance.

Denby's background may have been solidly middle class, but her mother's early career does suggest that she may have served as a role model for her daughters. In view of Denby's subsequent silence about her family it is hard to state with any certainty how concrete was their influence. In contrast, it does seem possible to cite her home town as having played some role in shaping her life for by the time of Denby's birth Bradford had

¹⁶ Dr Denby's occupation is listed as a G.P. on E.D.'s birth certificate.

¹⁷ B.M.A. (1924), 231.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 232.

developed a sophisticated social and political culture in which women played an active and public role.

Like many other industrial towns in Britain, Bradford faced a considerable number of social problems. In 1870 when its population was 145 thousand, it was described as 'noted for its worsteds, smoke, filth and high infant mortality'.¹⁹ As elsewhere Bradford's citizens built a charitable, political and social infrastructure to deal with these problems.

For much of the century the Royal Infirmary had been the main charitable institution in the city but in the wake of the economic depression of the 1870s and the emergence of a reformed philanthropy instigated by the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and settlement movements of the 1880s, Bradford's socially concerned citizens began to found new voluntary organisations to help the town's poor, many of which were run by women.²⁰ The 1894 *Post Office Directory* lists, amongst many other institutions, an orphanage for girls and one for boys founded respectively in 1872 and 1888; a Bradford branch of the COS founded in 1880; the Bradford Ladies' Association for the Care of Friendless Girls (1881); the Bradford Cinderella Club 'to provide food, clothing and amusement for the children of the very poor'; The Nest, a nursery and dining room for poor children and the Bradford Women's Home and Shelter (1893).

If Bradford had developed an active voluntary social service sector by the end of the century it had also played a significant role in the development

¹⁹Hollis (1987), 178.

²⁰ The nature of philanthropy in the late 19th century will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

of labour politics in Britain. It was in Bradford that the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was formed in 1893 with the objective of sending working men to parliament without the need for sponsorship by either the Liberal Party or the Conservatives.²¹ Its policy was the 'collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'; it would always be the most socialist element within Britain's labour movement.²² From its inception the ILP actively encouraged the participation of women in its activities. Its Bradford branch had amongst its members some particularly redoubtable women who, along with their male comrades, were able to exert considerable influence on Bradford's town council.²³ Chief amongst these were Margaret McMillan and Alice and Edith Priestman.

According to family members, Denby was friendly with the Priestman family who were amongst Bradford's leading citizens.²⁴ There were two branches of the family. The first and more traditional side was headed by H.B. Priestman who led the Liberals on Bradford town council and was described as expressing himself 'in the puritanical individualism of the old Liberal School'.²⁵ The other branch, with whom Denby was friendly, were Quakers and members of the ILP: Arthur Priestman 'so transparently good that others could not help being good in his presence', his wife Edith, and their daughter-in-law Alice.²⁶ Both Priestman women were early members of the ILP and served on Bradford's Board of Guardians.²⁷ Both

²¹ Pelling (1976), 4.

²² Dowse (1966), 5.

²³ See Hannam (1987) for a discussion of women's role in the ILP in the West Riding.

²⁴ Correspondence with Ruth Wright, July 1998.

²⁵ Brockway (1946), 60.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 60

²⁷ Priestman and McMillan are discussed in Hannam (1987) and Hollis (1987)

women campaigned for the more humane treatment of people in the workhouse; they also spoke regularly at public meetings and during election campaigns. The active political and socially conscious work of the Priestmans suggests an important early role model for Denby. It also implies that she would have been aware of the work of the much better known Bradford woman politician, Margaret McMillan, who may have provided another model of dynamic modernity for Denby.²⁸ Fenner Brockway's description of McMillan as 'almost the perfect blend of idealist and practical reformer' could also serve as a description of Denby the housing consultant.²⁹ McMillan served on the local School Board between 1894 and 1902, and used this position to begin her work to improve children's lives. Under her impetus the town council would introduce free milk and school dinners and municipal baths. Familiarity with such strong models of womanhood may have suggested to Denby a future career path. It certainly seems feasible to see these women, in combination with the other factors under discussion here, as probable formative influences.

EDUCATION

In 1906, at the age of twelve, Denby joined her older sister Dorothy in attending Bradford Girls Grammar School. She left in 1913 at the age of nineteen.³⁰ Just as their mother had benefited from the increased opportunities available to middle-class women from the mid 1850s so too would the Denby sisters. It was, perhaps, their mother who pushed for her daughters to attend one of the new academic schools for middle-class girls

²⁸ See Bradburn (1989) for an account of McMillan's life.

²⁹ Brockway cited in *ibid*, 47.

³⁰ No school rolls exist for this date. Denby is first mentioned in the *Girls School Chronicle* of November 1906 as a member of the Upper IIIrd.

which even by the outbreak of war in 1914, catered only for the minority of middle class female education.³¹

Explanations vary for the desire to extend the education of middle-class girls. Carol Dyhouse argues that the creation of such schools reflected the desire of the professional middle classes to create a distinct identity for themselves, part of which necessitated the possession of a good education.³² Related to this process of identity formation was their espousal of the importance of cultural values. In the sexually divided world of the professional middle-class household, the woman was seen as the main source of cultural influence, a role for which a well-rounded education was deemed a prerequisite. Purvis argues slightly differently, preferring a broader explanation which places such reforms within the general expansion of democratic rights for individuals in the nineteenth century; further noting them as part of the wider women's movement with education as the key to a broad range of freedoms.³³ She also notes the more prosaic factor of the need for middle-class women to earn their own living. Whatever the causes, by the 1860s it was clear that the improvement of education for middle-class women was becoming accepted. In 1869 in the wake of the *Schools Inquiry Commission Report* (1867-8) which had condemned the state of girls' schooling the Endowed Schools Act was passed. This enabled 'provision...[to] be made as far as conveniently may be, for extending to girls the benefits of endowment'.³⁴

³¹ Purvis (1991), 76, notes that by the end of the 19th century approximately 30% of middle-class girls attended these schools; this figure was increasing by the early decades of the 20th century, but never reached parity with those for middle-class boys.

³² Dyhouse (1981), 58.

³³ Purvis (1991), 76.

³⁴ Cited in Eschbach (1993), 65.

It was under such a scheme that the Bradford Girls Grammar School (BGGS) was established in 1875 with funds raised from the endowment scheme for Bradford Boys Grammar School and by the Ladies Educational Association. It was the first girls' secondary school in the town. The aim of its founders was 'to provide a liberal education for girls of ability and enable some to go on to university or train for other professions...'.³⁵ The use of the phrase 'liberal education' is significant. BGGS girls would receive an education almost identical to that of boys of their class, following a curriculum which included maths, political economy and languages. Sarah Delamont has characterised this type of education as producing two new female roles for the beginning of the twentieth century: the celibate career woman, and the wife who was an intellectual partner to her husband.³⁶ This second concept reflected the refashioning of domestic institutions by the feminists of the mid century which had been adopted by the professional middle classes. Rather than rejecting marriage outright, the old paradigm of the wife as subservient to her husband was replaced by the wife as partner. She would, again, be equal but different.

That this was the philosophy behind the running of the School is clear from the Founders' statement. It also becomes apparent from a survey of the pages of the school's magazine the *Bradford Girls Grammar School Chronicle*. Frequent mention is made of the Old Girls Union (OGU) which had been formed in 1889 'to interest former pupils in philanthropic work in the town' which, as has already been shown, was extensive.³⁷ The OGU's activities included a working girls club, the Nest Club (a nursery)

³⁵ Ellison (1965), 1.

³⁶ Delamont & Duffin (1978), 184.

³⁷ Ellison (1965), 3.

and a 'guild of joyful surprises' which provided Christmas entertainment for poor children. Such good work on the part of old girls was based on the premise that they would have the leisure time to devote to such activities, suggesting that the OGU was aimed at those who lived at home without pursuing a career, or married soon after leaving school, the 'intellectual partners' of the future.

For the 'celibate careerist' the *Chronicle's* pages offered information and inspiration. Every issue featured articles on the variety of work available to the educated woman. For example, in October 1897 there was an article on 'Pharmacy as a Profession for Women'; the next year 'Work in an East London Parish'; May 1902 had 'Sanitary Inspection as a Career for Women' by Marie Stuart. This article is particularly interesting for its author summarises the ethos which was fundamental to the organisation of the school throughout the period when Denby was a pupil. Indeed the sentiments which Stuart expresses are a paradigm for what was expected of the first generation of girls to benefit from academic day school education. She wrote 'The woman who aims at success *must* specialise; there is too much of the amateur about women's work, she must be an expert...'. BGGS girls were expected to achieve and put their education to good use. Stuart continued 'I would remind those who are seeking for a career with something more than the mere money making element in it that Ruskin once said: "the beginning of Art is in getting our country clean and our people beautiful"', a theme which she saw as analogous to the career of Sanitary Inspector '...it seeks to make a purer, more beautiful life for the women and girls of the working classes'.

This article encapsulates the sensibility which permeated the world into which Denby was born and spent her formative years. Such an ethos would have been apparent to all the school's pupils and reinforced by like-minded parents at home. It would prove to be a long-term influence. Many of the sentiments expressed by Stuart can be detected in the philosophy of the voluntary sector for which Denby worked in the 1920s. Chief amongst these were the preoccupation with the need to be useful citizens, and that money making was not the most important endeavour in life. An equally important concept was the equation of beauty with the reform of the environment used by the working classes, especially working-class women.

A survey of the pages of the *Chronicle* also provides information on Denby's progress through the school. She is listed as taking and passing exams in drawing and music suggesting that her talents were as much artistic as they were academic. In November 1910 (aged sixteen) she gained a second class Lower Certificate (the examinations regulated by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge) having passed Arithmetic, additional Mathematics, Scripture Knowledge, History, Geography and Botany. The following year she gained part of her Higher Certificate with passes in English, Geography, Biology and Drawing, two years later adding French, History and a further qualification in English to this list. She left the school in July 1913.

BEGINNING A CAREER

Denby was now faced with a set of choices. She was well-educated. In addition the ethos of her school and friendships was predicated on the

belief that such knowledge should be put to some useful purpose; to have enjoyed the privilege of an education required some form of duty to society in return. This could take several forms. The most desirable choice, if there was sufficient family wealth, remained to return to the domestic sphere, supported by her parents and then by a husband. Her education could be put to unpaid use in voluntary social work, and subsequently would enable her to be the intellectual partner to her husband and enlightened mother of his children. Alternatively she might choose to continue her education by going to university followed by a career, probably in teaching. Or, if circumstances were such that she could not go to university, she could seek a career immediately on leaving school, something which required either a less expensive amount of training or none at all: nursing, or some form of clerical work.

Faced with such options the choices that Denby could make were informed by a number of factors. Her performance at school, although adequate, seems to have been undistinguished, she does not seem to have been a girl marked out for university and an academic career. If she were unlikely to win a scholarship the cost of sending her to university without one would undoubtedly have been too much for her parents who had three other daughters to support, two still at school when Denby finished her education. This would also have precluded Denby, at least in the long term, from staying at home and pursuing a life of leisure and unpaid good works. So, like many women of her generation, Denby would have been expected to work and support herself, at least until she married. This, more or less, was to be the path she took.

There is no record of what Denby did during the two years after she left school in July 1913. It is not until February 1915 that there is any evidence to show that she was taking the first steps towards her ultimate career. In that month the Personalia section of the BGGs' *Chronicle* recorded that she was taking a course of secretarial training in Leeds, which she completed in the April of that year. Secretarial work was widely recognised as a respectable and appropriate career for women.³⁸ One which was both safe - women were usually segregated from male colleagues - and steady with employers such as the Post Office and some branches of the Civil Service.³⁹

Quite why Denby should have taken this course is not clear. Although secretarial skills would prove to be useful in all aspects of her later work the sense one gets of her character suggests someone who would have found being a secretary or clerk the most boring of occupations. Since her next step was to enrol for a Certificate in Social Sciences at the London School of Economics (LSE) which offered a training for those who wished to become involved in social work, it seems likely that she never intended to pursue a secretarial career. Certainly the choice of social work as a career makes much more sense for someone with her education and background. It suggests also that Edith Priestman's work may have inspired Denby on this particular path. It did, however, entail a move to London, something her parents may have been unhappy about. Perhaps the secretarial course was an attempt to promote an alternative career, and would serve as a delaying tactic. The gap between leaving school and

³⁸ See Silverstone (1976) and Davidoff and Westover (1986) for discussions of the gendering of women's employment at this date. Denby's course was run by the Yorkshire Ladies' Council of Education.

³⁹ Davy (1986), 128.

beginning training (Denby was 22 when she went to the LSE) may have been devoted to debates about her chosen career in which she was required to compromise her wishes before her parents gave in to hers. This may also explain why she used the move to the LSE as the opportunity to break away from her family and to embark on the life of reinvention which she pursued until her death.

A related influence, particularly on Denby's desire to reinvent herself, may also be found in a consideration of the changing definitions of femininity as she grew to maturity. It has already been noted that Denby grew up in a world where women's work was justifiable provided it brought the domestic world into the public; her chosen career of social work certainly fitted this paradigm. It was, however, tinged with the notion of the 'celibate careerist'. This may be seen as in conflict with the model of female work offered by the activities of the (married) Priestman women which may have been in Denby's mind as she planned her career. The solution, for her private life at least, lay in a new model of femininity.

This was the 'New Woman' whose appearance represented a new phase in feminism, one which offered the first critique of the 'equal but different' philosophy which had dominated since the 1850s. Its emergence reflected the impact of first wave feminism, especially the fact that one of the most significant 'side effects' of opening up education is that it encourages and enables people to think for themselves. The 'New Woman' accepted the equality of opportunity the pioneers had introduced, but fought against conventional concepts of femininity. She sought instead many of the freedoms which men took for granted. The term, coined in the 1890s,

referred to a young woman of the middle or upper classes who signified her difference from her more ordinary sisters by, amongst other activities, reading 'advanced' literature, smoking, and travelling alone. The 'New Woman' was not a celibate careerist; work was important to her, but so was her sexuality. Above all, the key element of her character was personal freedom to do whatever she liked, whenever she liked.⁴⁰

The characteristics of the 'New Woman' do match the Denby who lived and worked in London in the 1920s and 1930s. She led an independent life, never marrying, instead she had several affairs. Her friends were all socially progressive. This behaviour offers a picture of a woman who, though her initial choices may have been framed by her schooling, family background and mid-century notions of femininity, was determined to forge from these influences a new path.

LONDON AND THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Having broken free from Bradford Denby entered the modern world of London when she enrolled at the LSE in 1916 to take its Certificate in Social Science. There she learnt the particular view of society and theory of social practice which would stay with her throughout her working life. It was also at the LSE that she met the first of her lifelong friends, Margaret Russell (later Lloyd) through whom she would gain access to the socially and politically progressive set in London. It was a key period in her transformation from Elsie Denby to Elizabeth Denby.

⁴⁰ Bland (1995), 144-149.

Denby joined the LSE as it was consolidating the significant role it had played in what Jose Harris has called 'the classic age of social policy debate'.⁴¹ It is impossible to understand Denby's career without reference to the continuing debates about the role of the state and the purpose of social work which were a backdrop to her life's work. The history of philanthropic activity in Britain and its ultimate transformation into the professionalised welfare sector of the post-war settlement is long and complicated and beyond the scope of the discussion in this thesis, however since this was the broad context in which Denby chose to work, those aspects of it which informed her practice do necessitate analysis. As I shall explain, although the process whereby social welfare gradually became the sole prerogative of state institutions led to significant shifts within the voluntary sector nevertheless the philosophy of social welfare which that sector had developed since the 1870s would inform much of the emerging state welfare policy.

By the time war broke out in 1914 two prevailing views of state welfare had developed in Britain. One advocated the complete assumption by the state of responsibility for the provision of basic welfare such as pensions, health care and so forth. Here the Webbs were the most ardent protagonists. The other advocated a 'mixed economy of welfare' in which the state and the voluntary sector cooperated to provide social services. This view was put forward by certain factions within the COS and a new type of welfare organisation formed in the 1900s, Guilds of Help and Councils of Social Welfare. Although these factions represent different conceptualisations of what role the state should play, what is significant is that they both worked from the premise that the state should have some

⁴¹ Harris (1989), 27. This section relies heavily on this article.

role. This was in sharp contrast to the view that had dominated political practice for most of the nineteenth century, that state intervention was to be limited as it affected the fundamental right of the individual to do what he wished. This stance came under attack from the 1870s onwards when the school of social theory known as British Idealism reconceptualised the role of the state. In the context of social distress and national decay philosophers such as T.H.Green and Bernard Bosanquet argued that 'the purpose of the state is to promote the good life of its citizens and to develop the moral nature of man'.⁴²

A corollary of this reconfiguration of the role of the state, was a reworking of the role of the individual or citizen in relation to it. The Idealists believed that the only way for society to progress was for all its members to participate fully in its collective life.⁴³ Their guiding principle was that: 'The perfection and moral condition of a state is dependent upon the degree of citizenship in its membership'.⁴⁴ For the Webbs the perfection of the state could be achieved by granting everyone entitlement to basic social welfare in order to create a sense of belonging; a citizenship of entitlement under which the state became supreme and the recipient passive. Opposed to this was the Idealists' concept of active citizenship which envisaged a more reciprocal relationship between citizen and state. In return for social welfare, the citizen would participate in the life of the community, pushing both towards a higher state of existence. Both views would inform social practice over the next half century.

⁴² Vincent & Plant (1984), 2. See also Harris (1992).

⁴³ Heater (1990), 62ff.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Vincent & Plant (1984), 26.

In the context of social work the influence of Idealism is significant because it required action; it should be understood as both a political theory and a practical one. The end was the moral state, the means was the drawing out from individuals their potential for citizenship, for the Idealists all firmly believed that within everyone there was a 'better self'. Harris notes that the COS believed that 'all human beings, however destitute were fundamentally rational'.⁴⁵ Incumbent upon those who were already rational citizens was the duty, on the one hand, to participate in civic life and on the other to enable the less fortunate to realise their potential. Although debate would rage thenceforth about the best way to do this the concepts remained, more or less unaltered, fundamental to the practices of the social agencies for whom Denby worked, and indeed to her conceptualisation of what she did.

In the period under discussion here the practical expression of Idealist theory gave rise to two main approaches to social work. The first focused on work with the individual. Here the work of the COS was most important.⁴⁶ Its focus was 'to enable disadvantaged individuals to become more effective citizens' by one-to-one visiting and casework.⁴⁷ The second approach, very much an extension of the COS' philosophy, was to work on a community-wide level. This was the arena of the Settlement Movement which sought to make of local areas environments where 'individual citizenship could become more effective, and in which a sense of civic idealism could flourish.'⁴⁸ This suggests a dynamic relationship between the individual and his or her community which it was the duty of all

⁴⁵ Harris (1989), 33.

⁴⁶ See Harris (1989) and Moore (1977) for detailed accounts of the COS' history.

⁴⁷ Vincent & Plant (1984), 133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 133.

who could to further, including the state.

The growing emphasis on the role of the state, implicit within Idealism, also led to a shift in the attribution of blame for the existence of poverty and other social ills. Many commentators came to see these as less to do with individual failure and more to do with faults of the body politic.⁴⁹ By the 1890s this had given rise to a huge burst of research epitomised by the investigations of Booth and Rowntree and the founding of the London School of Economic and Political Science by Sidney Webb in 1895. His reasons for establishing the School reflect these changes. He wrote: '...we were suffering from much lack of research in social matters and I wanted to promote it'.⁵⁰ The special aim of the School would be 'the study and investigation of the concrete facts of industrial life and the actual working of economic and political relations as they exist, or have existed in the United Kingdom...'.⁵¹

The attention paid to the body politic by people like Booth and Webb also began to influence the COS who became interested in the application of such research to practice, a concern which manifested itself in attempts to formulate methods of training voluntary social workers. Significantly, women were at the forefront of these early developments. In 1887 Octavia Hill in conjunction with the Women's University Settlement (WUS) set up the first courses in the house management system she had developed.⁵² In 1891 the WUS inaugurated a series of lectures on voluntary social work accompanied by the opportunity for women settlers

⁴⁹ Harris (1989), 31.

⁵⁰ Webb, 1903, quoted by McGregor (1986), 212.

⁵¹ Dahrendorf (1995), 20.

⁵² Lewis (1991), ch 1.

to take placements in local relief agencies. In 1896, it put together a joint lecture series with the COS and the National Union of Women Workers and formed a Social Education Committee to develop training further. In 1903 these efforts were amalgamated into the School of Sociology (SOS) by the COS, under the directorship of E.J.Urwick, a former assistant warden at Toynbee Hall.

Urwick's intention was to use the school to move away from what he called 'the rule of thumb stage' of social work, towards a more systematic approach which would teach students 'social growth and evolution; social philosophy; social economics and social psychology'.⁵³ The course was essentially theoretical, as this curriculum suggests, although there would be work experience in local COS offices. By 1910 the School offered programmes of research training and academic courses for 'professional' social workers who could go on to follow careers as diverse as factory inspection, casework, welfare work for children, workers, the disabled, rent collection and housing management.

The existence of the SOS and its provision of training for social workers reflects the fact that this had become a growing area of work for educated women. It is also an example of the professionalisation of another type of work which carried the domestic sphere into the public. Additionally, it reflects the growing demand for a trained workforce as the Liberal Government elected in 1906, under the influence of both the Webbs and the Idealists, introduced pensions and national insurance acts and other forms of social welfare provision which they chose to administer in

⁵³ The School of Sociology and its absorption into the LSE are discussed in Harris (1989).

partnership with existing voluntary provision.

Alongside the development of academic training in social work and social science at the SOS and the LSE and the growth of state intervention, some elements of the voluntary sector began to reconstruct themselves in the wake of new definitions of social responsibility. The most significant bodies were the Guild of Help movement, which began in Bradford (how much this may have influenced Denby is speculative) and the Councils of Social Welfare Movement which was based in London. Both had their origins in the COS but in keeping with the more progressive branch of the Society (as represented by those who had founded the SOS) looked towards a more public role for its workers and a greater degree of cooperation with public authorities.

In many respects the Guild of Help movement established a paradigm of practice which would become the norm post war. First established in Bradford in 1904 its aim was two-fold.⁵⁴ It would train a body of voluntary workers who would arouse a civic concern that could not be ignored and having done so, it would then cooperate with public authorities to ensure those in need would receive the social service they required. This represents two key shifts in the role of the voluntary sector. First, the GOHs would not provide relief themselves. Second, rather than being entirely private bodies, cooperation with public authorities was seen as an integral part of their work. The Social Welfare Movement, which began in Hampstead in 1907, pursued a similar policy. These were both essentially administrative and campaigning bodies which, again, would require

⁵⁴ See Moore (1977) and Cahill & Jowitt (1980), on which I rely here, for detailed accounts of these two movements.

trained workers.

Social work was clearly established as a career by the 1910s but although the SOS existed it was not part of a university. For many members of the COS this was a desirable, and logical, next step. At the same time, Sidney Webb was arguing for the need for a trained force of social workers to run the welfare system he envisaged. This led in 1912, after prolonged discussion to the absorption of the SOS into the LSE's Department of Sociology, which was renamed the Department of Social Science and Administration.⁵⁵ E.J.Urwick and a number of SOS staff became LSE staff, and the whole school came under the direction of an advisory committee with representatives from both the LSE and the COS.

Under Urwick the Department continued the combination of the practical with the theoretical he had initiated within the SOS. He thought that his courses should '[send] out persons of character and responsibility rather than people merely trained in techniques', he continued '[social workers] should let their minds dwell on the idea of the good life rather than concentrate on mechanical techniques and methods'; a further reiteration of the Idealist concept of practical work being carried out with a specific social goal in mind.⁵⁶

This was the philosophy which pervaded the teaching of the Certificate of Social Science (also called the Diploma) which Denby embarked upon in the autumn term of 1916. By the time she joined the Department, it was a

⁵⁵ Discussions first began in 1906. Harris (1989) elaborates in detail the key factors behind the merger.

⁵⁶ Urwick cited in Harris (1989), 53.

well-established course. Amongst the Department's students the greater part of its women constituents were taking the Certificate.⁵⁷ Of its graduates the vast majority went on to become social workers.⁵⁸ The LSE *Calendar* for 1916-17 shows the curriculum she would have followed. Lecture courses ranged from a Preparatory Class in Casework and Methods of Charitable Administration to Welfare Work in Factories and An Introduction to Social Philosophy.⁵⁹ Denby was taught by university staff and by visiting lecturers who included Seebohm Rowntree and Margaret Bondfield. As part of the course she was also required to carry out practical work. For this, she was based at Toynbee Hall and worked in the surrounding East End slums.⁶⁰ She would also have had spent one day a week in a work placement scheme in the final term of the course.⁶¹

WORK

During her time at the LSE Denby had gained a thorough training in the theory and practice of social work.⁶² She also gained a lifelong friend in Margaret Russell. To gauge Russell's influence on Denby is difficult but her career after the LSE gives an idea of the sort of world Denby was becoming part of following her break with her family. Russell had been educated at Bedales before attending the LSE.⁶³ She was then involved in the Friends Emergency Committee for the Assistance of Enemy Aliens

⁵⁷ Figures in LSE (1934), xii, state that between 1902/3 & 1931/2 there were 2,428 students of whom 1,333 were male, 1,095 were female; of whom the great bulk held certificates or diplomas in Sociology, Social Science or Geography.

⁵⁸ LSE (1934), xvii, shows 254 graduates going into social work, the next greatest number is 15 going into university teaching.

⁵⁹ LSE (1916).

⁶⁰ *BGGGS Chronicle* Personalalia column for November 1916.

⁶¹ Barclay (1976), ch.2.

⁶² The LSE does not allow access to deceased students' files, so it has not been possible to gain a great deal of information about Denby's progress on the course.

⁶³ Information on Russell is scant. See her entry in LSE (1934).

during the war and worked at the Ministry of Labour before marrying the civil servant Edward Lloyd in 1918. Thereafter she became heavily involved in the Birth Control movement in London, and in Labour Party politics.

Most of Denby's fellow students would have become social workers, but Denby, with Margaret Russell, entered a different though not entirely unrelated field, joining the Ministry of Labour (MOL). This was created in 1916 in response to calls from the TUC and labour organisations for a government body to deal directly with issues relating to employment. Hence its remit which covered industrial relations, unemployment and economic policy.⁶⁴ This does not immediately suggest great scope for someone with a Certificate in Social Science however the Ministry did deal with the Poor Law and issues such as factory welfare so it is possible that Denby might have expected to use her skills in these fields. Alternatively it may have been that this was the first job to appear which enabled her to support herself and so not have to return home to Bradford. It was also a good job. This was wartime and the Civil Service, which had lost much of its staff to the forces, called on women, especially those who were well-educated, to enter it as their form of war work.⁶⁵ This meant that women were able to work at nearly every level and activity within the Service, as opposed to the more traditional jobs of clerk or female inspectors of prisons to which their gender had previously restricted them.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Lowe (1974) & (1986) discusses the history of the MOL.

⁶⁵ Martindale (1938), 2

⁶⁶ In 1914 women comprised approximately 21% of total staff, by 1919, 56%. Zimmech (1984), 906

Denby's first post within the MOL, between 1917 and 1919, was as an Administrative Assistant in the Joint Industrial Council Division. She then became a Subsection Director in the Industrial Training Department, a post she left in 1921.⁶⁷ By this date the Civil Service had begun to revise its stance on the employment of women in the wake of the reinstatement of demobilised servicemen. Women's establishments were not renewed and when they were encouraged to join the Service it was not in the higher echelons, as in wartime, but in clerical grades. It would not be possible for women to take the entrance exam for administrative grades until the end of 1922 by which time it was hoped '...most of the enterprising candidates would have gone elsewhere'.⁶⁸ Since Denby seems to have been employed in two year stretches and her second phase in Industrial Training drew to an end in 1921, it may well have been the case that she was prevented from continuing within the Service at her level and so decided to leave.

What happened next it is not clear. None of Denby's autobiographical pieces list any activity between 1921 and 1923 when she began working for the Kensington Council of Social Service. This suggests that as far as she was concerned it was not important to the person she later became, but it remains a tantalising gap in her history. That information which is available about this 'lost' two years suggests that by the end of it she had succeeded in entering the intellectual and political circles which would 'complete' her training and inform much of her later practice. The clearest picture of her, more or less at this time, can be found in the autobiography of Denby's closest friend Marjory Allen who was married to Clifford Allen,

⁶⁷ LSE (1934), 48.

⁶⁸ Zimmech (1984), 915

Leader of the ILP and one of its major theorists.⁶⁹ Allen describes meeting Denby for the first time at a summer school organised by the ILP probably in 1924, recalling 'a handsome, positive young woman from Yorkshire whose name was Elizabeth Denby...manifestly a great original, with strong feelings, a ready gift of expression and an unerring eye for human needs'.⁷⁰

This description offers an arresting image of the type of woman Denby had become by the age of thirty; someone who was confident enough and sufficiently politicised to attend an ILP summer school. She was also a person who presented herself to the public as Elizabeth. Allen calls her Elizabeth not Elsie, that version of Denby was gone, replaced with a much more sophisticated figure. Such processes and transformations were significant to Denby on both a personal and public level. Whether she became a member of the ILP as part of her identity re-formation or whether belonging to the ILP helped her forge a new identity is less important than the fact that it was significant in the next phase of her life. The ILP influenced her both through its political philosophy and also because it introduced her to a distinct social stratum within British society. The connections she made in the 1920s would help her as she tried to make the transition to being a housing consultant in the 1930s.

It has already been noted that Denby was familiar with the ILP from childhood but when she joined is not clear. If she had not already joined in Bradford it seems possible that it was her friendship with Margaret Russell that may have led to her membership. The ILP in its organisation

⁶⁹ Marjory Allen (1897-1976) was Denby's lifelong friend. She was a notable landscape gardener in the 1920s, and became active in the Nursery Schools Association in the 1930s.

⁷⁰ Allen & Nicholson (1975), 84

and ethical view of politics would have much to attract a 'New Woman' like Denby, especially as it was the only section within the Labour Party which welcomed women as equal members.⁷¹

She may also have been drawn to the ILP because of the type of member it attracted. Under Clifford Allen's leadership (1922-1926) it became the party of 'the intellectual, the emancipated woman and the London bohemian'.⁷² Allen also sought to transform the ILP from an increasingly less authoritative adjunct of the Labour Party as a whole (its influence had been severely dented by the ILP's commitment to pacifism throughout the war) into the 'policy-making powerhouse' of the Labour Party and devoted much of his energy to setting up expert commissions into, for example, Finance, and Industrial Policy.⁷³ Allen's party was to be an intellectual think tank, leading the way in tackling the key social problems of the day. This activity culminated in the 1926 manifesto for workers *A Living Wage* which demanded reforms such as a statutory minimum wage for all workers; the introduction of child allowances and a national building organisation to construct better housing.

Denby's membership of the ILP and her attendance at its summer schools gave her not only a political philosophy and the concept of the think tank to follow, but access to a wide range of acquaintances and friends, most of whom were amongst the most progressive people of that date. Amongst those who attended the summer school the year she met Marjory Allen were Margaret Russell (perhaps they went together), Miles and Joan

⁷¹ Graves (1994), 156.

⁷² Dowse (1966), 83.

⁷³ Marwick (1962), 64.

Malleson (actor, who ran the ILP Arts Guild, and birth control activist respectively), Dora Russell, birth control activist and Francis Meynell the typographer.⁷⁴ The Allens were also impressively well-connected. Clifford Allen was a close friend of Bertrand Russell and a member of the social set around Ottoline Morrell. Marjory Allen's extended family included the sculptor Eric Gill. She was also friendly with Ottoline Morrell, and with the painter Winifred Knights.

Between 1916 and the mid 1920s Elsie Marian Denby had been transformed into Elizabeth Denby. She had joined the intellectual elite which would dominate London's cultural scene in the inter-war period, something which Max Fry later described as dependent 'on a couple of hundred people most of whom knew each other'.⁷⁵ At the same time she also began a new job when in 1923 she became Organising Secretary to the Kensington Council of Social Service. In many respects she lived parallel lives during the next decade, a committed campaigner for housing reform on the one hand, and modern intellectual new woman on the other; a dichotomous existence which seems intrinsic to her throughout her life. In what she called her 'Apprenticeship in North Kensington' she learnt everything which would equip her for her next transformation, into Elizabeth Denby, housing consultant.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Allen & Nicholson (1975), 84; Russell (1975), 175.

⁷⁵ Fry (1975), 138.

⁷⁶ DP 'Apprenticeship'.

CHAPTER TWO

THE KENSINGTON YEARS

part one: New Philanthropy in north Kensington, 1923-1925

In 1923 Elizabeth Denby became the Organising Secretary of the Kensington Council of Social Service (KCSS). Based in the heart of the slums of north Kensington, the KCSS was a voluntary organisation which attempted to coordinate social work and deal with the most pressing welfare issues in the locality. Amongst the most urgent of these was bad housing and the need for its improvement, a cause for which the KCSS campaigned vigorously. In its pursuit of better housing the Council would first establish a housing campaign group, the Kensington Representative Housing Committee, which worked directly under its auspices. When this proved to have limited success two separate organisations were founded: the Kensington Housing Association as a propaganda body in 1925, and in 1926 the Kensington Housing Trust as a public utility society to build new housing. This work would culminate in the participation by Kensington's housing activists in a series of exhibitions held between 1931 and 1938 called 'New Homes for Old', organised by housing workers from across London to draw attention to the slum problem.

Denby played a significant role in all this work. In so doing she accumulated the vast body of knowledge about social conditions amongst London's poor, the techniques of research and propaganda and a further set of personal contacts which would enable her to launch herself as a housing consultant in 1933. This was a crucial period in Denby's life and it

is the chief concern of this and the following two chapters to examine the philosophies and practices of the voluntary sector and its housing campaigns in some detail in order to convey their influence both for her and, at a broader level, the development of British social and cultural policy as a whole.

THE NEW PHILANTHROPY

Denby entered the voluntary sector just as it had transformed itself into what was labelled the New Philanthropy.¹ This was a dynamic phase in the sector's development which built on the reconfiguration of the role of voluntary social welfare organisations and citizenship initiated by the Guilds of Help and Councils of Social Welfare in the period before 1914. It was also a response to changes in the role played by the voluntary sector as the state, in a body of post-war legislation, assumed primary responsibility for many of the areas of welfare provision for which the volunteers had previously catered, maternal and child welfare for example. Although the state often elected to appoint voluntary organisations to dispense such welfare, a significant shift in the balance of power between the public and private welfare sector had taken place by 1918-1919, a process which would continue during the twenties and thirties.

From key areas of its activities the voluntary sector was, henceforth, effectively usurped. After 1918, it could act as a provider of welfare only when local or national authorities so chose and when it did provide, it had little or no control over those to whom it ministered. In response, the sector could, perhaps, have allowed itself to be absorbed into the state

¹ See Macadam (1934) for the most thorough contemporary account of this new phase in voluntary sector activity.

system but it did not. Fuelled by the Idealist belief in the importance of individual acts of citizenship as the basis of any progressive society it elected to turn this imposed change in function to its advantage and refashioned itself into a vanguard body whose role would be to seek new areas of social concern - overlooked by the state - and develop new approaches to social welfare to solve them. In this guise - the New Philanthropy - it would remain a significant presence in the field of social welfare throughout the inter-war decades.

The task of the reconfigured voluntary sector, wrote Elizabeth Macadam, would be to build on a foundation of definite facts and seek 'new and practical methods of solving fresh our newly recognised problems as they arise'. Propaganda now took on a central role. It was the 'necessary precursor of all reform'. In this light, the role of private citizens became even more important. It was they who would seek out the new areas where the state should act because, she believed, '...private action can push ahead of public opinion'.² Hilda Jennings, another writer on social work, noted 'The volunteer no longer resists the temptation to apply for State aid, but when he embarks on some piece of pioneer work openly declares his hope that success in it will lead to the assumption of state responsibility'.³

The sector's conceptualisation of the pioneer role is particularly interesting in two respects. At a broader level it can be seen as encouraging the sector to be innovative and imaginative, an approach facilitated by the small scale on which it worked. In terms of what Denby would go on to do, it

² *Ibid*, 31-32.

³ Jennings (1930), 18.

also suggests a rationale on her part for her work. It was intended to set an example that public (and private) authorities would follow and, with luck, provide her with further advisory work.

The two-fold aspect of work under the New Philanthropy - as government agent and experimental body - meant that the voluntary sector played a different role from its predecessor. It also demanded a more organised workforce, a process facilitated by the emergence of the first generations of qualified workers such as Denby, many of whom were paid. A further aspect of this reorganisation was that it required much more coordination of practice at both a local and national level. This process is exemplified by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) which was founded in 1919 following the amalgamation of the pre-war Guilds of Help and Councils of Social Welfare, and various wartime charities, in order to enable '...diverse agencies [to] come together into some form of overall federation or council to eliminate confusion and overlapping; and to work together as partners with the newly developing statutory services'.⁴ The NCSS' role, as a national body, was not to provide welfare. Instead it would act as a coordinating group for groups who did, directing them towards the appropriate public authorities and vice versa. It would also instigate research into social need and, on occasion, act as an agent of government in coordinating the supply of welfare.⁵

Another important aspect of the NCSS' work was to encourage the establishment of local councils of social service. It envisaged these as having three main functions: to coordinate voluntary and official social

⁴ Brassnett (1969), 19, is my main source here for the NCSS' history.

⁵ For example, it coordinated welfare relief in the Distressed Areas during the Depression.

work locally; to secure provision of organised groups of friendly visitors and other forms of personal service; and to undertake inquiries into specific social questions.⁶ This reflected the NCSS' belief that whilst a body which coordinated activity was necessary at a national level in order to achieve maximum efficiency and publicity, at a country-wide level the existence of groups able to respond to specific local needs was necessary otherwise the provision of social service would become too distanced and the vital element of personal contact^{be} lost. These Councils would also provide the national body with data about social conditions which could be used to lobby the state for improved welfare provision.

Although the emergence of the New Philanthropy represented a new and distinctive phase in the history of the voluntary sector in terms of how it carried out social work, in many respects much of this work remained indebted to the ideologies of its predecessors. The continued emphasis on personal social service (albeit now coordinated and regulated), friendly visiting and the insistence on the importance of face to face contact manifested in the location of local councils in the heart of slum areas, connects them to the settlement movement and the COS to which they were heirs. This continuity was reinforced by the fact that many of the personnel of such groups had served previously in these organisations. Concepts such as active citizenship, 'the best to the lowest', the importance of beauty in everyday life, remained strong, as shall be seen, throughout the period under discussion.

If there was a change, it was in emphasis. Concomitant with the emergence of a full democracy, the inter-war decades saw a renewed

⁶ Brassnett (1969), 24.

concern with the relationship between the citizen and the community, be that a person's immediate neighbourhood or the nation as a whole. The introduction of universal male suffrage in 1918, followed in 1928 by the extension of the vote to all women, meant that reformers became concerned with how best to encourage the newly enfranchised to the duties of full citizenship. Weight and Beach have noted that it was generally accepted that a nation could not survive unless its people adhered to certain codes of conduct and in return received certain rights (the vote^{or} pensions, for example).⁷ In this context it became important to encourage the worker, or potential citizen, to see themselves not just as an individual but as part of a much larger grouping to which they had responsibilities. Everything should be done to enable them to become part of and feel part of society as a whole. This now became a central aim of social reform. Reviewing the work of Toynbee Hall in 1934 J.A.R.Pimlott wrote 'a healthy group and neighbourhood life is a sine qua non of a successful democracy. In Settlements and neighbourhood centres...may be found schools of citizenship for the education of electors in the technique of democracy through discussion and social intercourse and practical experience of self government'.⁸

This new emphasis was also reflected in the way voluntary groups argued for reform, especially to those of the middle and upper classes who were already felt to have attained citizenship but who had perhaps forgotten its duties. In this period, the middle-class public was constantly exhorted not to stand back and do nothing: 'Each one of us...is responsible as a citizen of the greatest city in the world for the public opinion which rules the rulers

⁷ Weight & Beach (1998), 1.

⁸ Pimlott (1934), 265.

of the city, and is therefore personally responsible for allowing the continuance of such conditions...'.⁹ This quotation also reveals the continuation of the basic assumption, already noted, that at heart everyone was a rational human being.¹⁰ The logic worked thus. Because everybody had a sense of duty, it could be appealed to. If you gave people information they would respond by forming a body of public opinion which would push for change. This in turn would spark off the inherent sense of duty amongst those in a position to legislate.

It is also important to note here another continuity between old and New philanthropy. Despite the latter's insistence on the value of citizenship to all classes, this was to be achieved by one class, essentially the middle, making this possible for another, the working class. The New Philanthropists were, nearly to a man and woman, as class bound as their predecessors. The gap between the classes was to be bridged, not destroyed.

A further aspect which reflects the connections between the New Philanthropy and the old is exemplified by Denby's presence within the voluntary sector. This demonstrates the continued importance of women's role in producing new ideas and approaches to welfare policy at both a private and ultimately public level. Jane Lewis has argued that whilst the sector was entirely private women's ideas and influence were central, but once it began to work in collaboration with the state in the inter-war period, their traditionally strong role within the movement began to decline. The New Philanthropy meant that although 'women gained the status of paid workers they were no longer positioned in such a

⁹ *The Phoenix*, journal of the Fulham Housing Association, (1931a), 3.

¹⁰ See Harris (1989).

way as to exert influence'.¹¹ Lewis based these observations primarily on the case of women social workers and it is my suggestion that whilst her argument holds for the case of social work the particular nature of the voluntary housing sector in the inter-war decades allowed its women workers, paid and unpaid, to retain positions of influence certainly in the 1920s and arguably in the 1930s as well.

That this was possible was due to the indifference of central government to a major social problem, the existence of large tracts of slum housing across Britain, throughout the 1920s. This created the space, as will be seen, for women voluntary workers to develop theories and practices of rehousing. The work of the housing campaigners in Kensington discussed here, provides a clear example of how such women were central to the development and advocacy of adventurous and imaginative welfare policies. Their presence within this area of activity only began to be affected when central government responded to campaigns for the amelioration of slum conditions by introducing successive slum clearance acts during the 1930s. Significantly, these policies were to be implemented by local authorities with the voluntary sector taking a small supporting role in the process.¹² This decision altered the kind of role the sector and its predominantly female workforce could take.

This is where Jane Lewis' argument becomes particularly important. She notes that the increasing bureaucratisation and nationalisation of welfare provision affected fundamentally the role women could play in its formulation and distribution. As the state took more and more control

¹¹ Lewis (1996), *passim*.

¹² Garside (1994).

over the distribution of, in this case social housing, the voluntary housing sector was increasingly marginalised and, when it was required, the bureaucratisation of welfare demanded specialisation of function. As top-down provision became the norm housing workers had to belong to one occupation only - social work or housing management or architecture - but not one which combined these roles. The work under discussion here shows how this process developed in the case of re-housing slum dwellers. For someone like Denby the vanguard role of the sector in the 1920s allowed her to perform many roles. Once the shift to a subsidiary (and limited) role for the sector began in the 1930s, it was more difficult to pursue a multi-faceted career. A choice now had to be made: to become a specialist within the sector or to leave it and make the best of her skills in the outside world.

This is not to say, however, that women's influence was diminished. The process of marginalisation was only underway in the 1930s. The point is, then, that women's role in social housing (and hence Denby's) mirrors that of the New Philanthropy itself. Their most active and influential years coincided with the peak of the New Philanthropy's influence; their influence declined, as it did, with the increase in statutory powers by central government which culminated in the establishment of the Welfare State. Women's 'disappearance' from influence may be attributed to the fact that they did not go on in great numbers to assume the parliamentary or civil service roles within the Welfare State which might have assured them of greater prominence after 1945. The fact that they were still active, even central, to the voluntary housing sector in the inter-war period did, however, mean that they were ultimately able to influence the form much

social policy took in the immediate post-war period, even if their influence declined after that. This means that if the voluntary sector as a whole was a major influence on the post-war settlement and if women were significant within its ranks as theorists and practitioners, then their contribution to the formation of the ideology of the Welfare State was far greater than has often been suggested

In the inter-war years then, despite the underlying shifts towards nationalisation of social welfare, the New Philanthropy enjoyed a period of dynamism and innovation and engendered debate in key areas of British life. This is particularly apparent in its contribution to debates about how best to resolve the post-¹⁹¹⁴⁻¹⁹¹⁸war housing shortage; a campaign in which the notion of its vanguard status and the impetus towards a responsible citizenship encouraged a particular set of responses. This was a campaign in which both the KCSS and Elizabeth Denby played a significant part.

THE KENSINGTON COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE

When Elizabeth Denby joined the KCSS in 1923 it had already been active for four years. Formed in 1919 'to unite Citizens in the Borough in friendly cooperation, and to promote the welfare of its inhabitants',¹³ it was amongst the earliest local branches of the NCSS.¹⁴ Although the establishment of such a group in Kensington may seem surprising like many apparently wealthy boroughs in London (and across Britain) it contained within its boundaries both great wealth and great deprivation.

¹³ *Report of the KCSS, 1921*. The records of the KCSS are held in the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Central Library (RBKCCL).

¹⁴ Brassnett (1969), 24. There were 45 by 1920.

The dividing line in the borough lay along Notting Hill Gate and Holland Park Road [2.1]. To the south lay prosperity, to the north a more mixed economic landscape. Around the wealth of Ladbroke Grove and its immediate vicinity lay a predominantly working-class community whose constituency ranged from those who had regular work with the area's main employers (the railway, the gas works) but could not afford to live in better accommodation further away, to those who lived several to a room in subdivided houses and could barely make ends meet. This meant that Kensington, as a whole, had some of the worst overcrowding and poverty statistics in London. The proportion of working-class people who lived two or more to a room was 38 per cent (the average for London was 25 percent); whilst of a total population of 181 thousand 7.9 per cent were on the poverty line. Its infant mortality rate of 77 per 1000 live births was particularly bad; only that of the neighbouring borough of Paddington was higher in London.¹⁵

The juxtaposition of wealth and poverty in north Kensington owed much to the presence of industry there before the area became part of the enormous surge in estate development in Kensington from the 1840s onwards.¹⁶ The cutting of a branch of the Grand Union Canal at its northern boundary in 1801 and a similar slicing through the area by the Great Western Railway in 1838 and the building of the Gas Works in 1845 (which left Kensal Green a particularly isolated enclave) meant that the uppermost parts of the borough were unlikely to be anything but working-class.¹⁷ The lower part of the area, with one small exception, was initially

¹⁵ Llewellyn Smith (1934), 427-8.

¹⁶ See GLC (1973) *passim* for a history of estate development in north Kensington.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 333.

more fortunate. Ladbroke Grove and the surrounding crescents and terraces were developed as high-rate housing for the middle and upper classes as they moved away from the centre of London, and provided large terraced and semi-detached houses of up to four and five storeys. The downturn here began with the construction of the City and Hammersmith Metropolitan Railway line which was built over and across the existing housing during the 1860s. The wealthy families soon moved out. Their homes became pockets of multi-occupancy, a process reinforced by the decision of developers to build dwellings aimed specifically at the working classes on remaining sites in the vicinity.

Around the wealth of the southern part of Ladbroke Grove developed distinct areas of poverty, 'The Potteries', so called because tiles and bricks were manufactured there, to the west of the Grove; Notting Dale, which spanned the area around Ladbroke Grove tube station, of which the local vicar would comment in 1911 that 'the neighbourhood grows poorer year by year'; and Kensal Green, within which Golborne Road and Kensal New Town, were the poorest parts, the latter largely due to its geographic isolation.¹⁸ In 1903 Charles Booth classified 55 per cent of its inhabitants as ^{living} in poverty.¹⁹

Such conditions led to a great deal of philanthropic welfare work in north Kensington from the mid-nineteenth century onwards; it would house one of the earliest local branches of the COS. By the outbreak of the First World War many of the people who would play leading roles in the KCSS were engaged in social welfare work in the area. Reginald Rowe, a future

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 303.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 334.

member of its housing campaign, worked for the Improved Tenements Association (ITA) which had been set up in 1900 to recondition bad housing in the area and introduce Octavia Hill's system of house management into its properties. Two important figures were the Alexander sisters, Rachel and Agnes, who typify the significant role played by women in local voluntary work in the period before 1945. At least one Alexander sister was on the Poor Law Board of Guardians before the war, and Agnes wrote a book in 1904 called *Some Kensington Problems*.²⁰ They were members of an extremely wealthy Quaker family who lived in Aubrey House on Campden Hill just to the north of Kensington High Street.²¹ Their private income allowed them to devote their lives to philanthropic work.²² Both Rachel and Agnes were involved with the KCSS but it was Rachel who was the more active of the two. A remarkable but self effacing woman she played a pivotal role in Kensington's voluntary sector and was one of the founders of the KCSS, which should be seen as the New Philanthropy in microcosm.²³

In the same way that the NCSS was established to coordinate and facilitate social work at national level, the KCSS acted to coordinate such activity within the boundaries of north Kensington. By 1921 it represented forty-nine societies in the area.²⁴ In keeping with the New Philanthropy was the

²⁰ Hollis (1987), 210.

²¹ Her father, an art collector and patron of Whistler, bought Aubrey House in 1873. See GLC (1973), ch 2.

²² The Alexander sisters are a fascinating example of women social workers, unfortunately they remain under-researched. Their papers are in RBKCCL and I have pieced together my account of their work from a brief examination of them, from references in Hollis (1987) and from Rachel's work with the Kensington Housing Association and Trust (of which she was again an instigator).

²³ Pepler (1996a).

²⁴ KCSS' *Annual Report*, 1921 in RBKCCL, Kensington Housing Trust (KHT) Collection.

task the KCSS set itself to discover 'any new or hitherto unsatisfied need of the local community and provide new services'.²⁵ It did this from its headquarters 'The Venture' (a renovated former pub) in the Portobello Road, the heart of Notting Dale. Its activities also give a clear idea of what the New Philanthropy meant in practice. The Venture was used 'for lectures, classes, concerts and other forms of instruction and recreation for young and old' and contained a library.²⁶ As well as educational facilities a savings bank was established and a Poor Man's Lawyer available. An important part of the Council's work was to campaign on local issues which included the raising of funds for a War Memorial Playing Field, arguing for the retention of the 10 O'clock closing time for public houses and the formation of the Kensington Federation of Girls Clubs in the wake of a survey into what clubs were available for boys and girls in the Borough.²⁷ It also held annual Public Health weeks.

Such a broad range of activity and service is very revealing. The KCSS sought to provide services which would enable its clients both to help themselves and to provide an environment in which they could become conscious of their potential, hence the emphasis on education and health issues. The KCSS did not see social service as the provision of a piece of one-off assistance rather it entailed a much broader approach, one which dealt with ^{the} whole person and every aspect of welfare provision which touched their lives. Such an approach meant that it was almost inevitable that the housing conditions in which its clients lived should become a key

²⁵ KCSS' *Annual Report*, 1949-50, article 'A Record of Thirty Years'; in London Metropolitan Archive (LMA) Acc 1888/52.

²⁶ KCSS pamphlet marking 12 years of social work, in RBKCCL KHT collection, no. 12145.

²⁷ These were opened in 1926 as Kensington Memorial Playing Ground, a six acre park on the west side of St Marks Road, in 'the Potteries'. GLC (1973), 317.

area of concern.

THE KENSINGTON REPRESENTATIVE HOUSING COMMITTEE

Amongst the KCSS's first sub-committees was one formed in 1920 to address the housing problem in the borough. In these first years the KCSS, somewhat naively as it turned out, focused on trying to encourage the borough council to enact its statutory duties in regard to housing and public health. The KCSS' *Annual Report* for 1921 stressed that it was '...most anxious to cooperate with the Borough Council and to maintain and strengthen the present demand for healthier and better conditions of life'.²⁸ During 1920, for example, it campaigned for the council to close basement dwellings and several of the worst common lodging houses which were dotted around north Kensington. It also followed the New Philanthropy technique of spreading information in order to invoke action. A series of three lectures were held in October 1921 to examine the practical steps which might be taken towards improving slum areas.²⁹ A year later a further series was held.³⁰ This time concern about the problem had reached such a height that: 'it was felt that the housing problem in Kensington had reached a stage which justified, and even demanded, a separate organisation to stimulate local opinion and concentrate voluntary effort'.³¹

²⁸ KCSS *Report* for 1921, RBKCCL KHT collection.

²⁹ These were: 'The Housing Problem in Kensington' by James Fenton, MOH for Kensington; 'The Improvement of Bad Areas' by Miss M. Jeffery, Estate Manager to HM Office of Woods & Forests (& one of Octavia Hill's pupils); the third 'lecture' was a discussion.

³⁰ Held in November 1922 the lectures were: 'Common Lodging Houses in Kensington' by Freda Hartley; 'Overcrowded Homes in Kensington' by the Rev. Carnegie; 'Bad Areas' by Alexander Paterson esq. & 'Housing Policy' by Major C.P.Lovelock of Carshalton Urban District Council.

³¹ KCSS *Annual Report*, 1923, RBKCCL KHT collection.

On 10th November 1922 a resolution was agreed to form 'a Joint Committee of representatives of all Organisations working in North Kensington and interested in housing...'.³² This became the Kensington Representative Housing Committee (KRHC) which seems to have begun work almost immediately this resolution was taken. Surviving documents show that its fourth meeting had been held by the 22nd January, 1923.³³

It was as the KCSS' campaign against housing conditions in the borough began to reach momentum that Denby became its Organising Secretary. Rather curiously, in her 'autobiography' she chose to date her entry into the housing campaign to 'when in 1926 I was appointed to become the first organising Secretary of the Kensington Housing Association and then of the Kensington Housing Trust'.³⁴ Perhaps her memory was playing tricks. Certainly her dates are incorrect; the Association was formed in 1925. Perhaps she did not count the KCSS years because her work there was only partly to do with housing. The first direct evidence of her work for the Council, however, places her at the heart of the KCSS' housing campaign when she is listed as the secretary for the first meeting of the KRHC's General Purposes Committee on Monday 19th April, 1923.³⁵

By the time Denby was present at KRHC meetings, the Executive Committee had already spent some time considering what its role should be. The general object became 'to improve the housing conditions in the poorer parts of Kensington; by building, if necessary, new houses; by

³² *Ibid.*

³³ RBKCCL KHT collection: Executive Committee Agendas of the KRHC, doc.no.18008.

³⁴ DP 'Apprenticeship'. No evidence survives to explain how Denby got this job.

³⁵ Minute book of KRHC, doc.17957, RBKCCL KHT collection.

restoring derelict or neglected houses; by taking steps in cooperation with the Borough Council or London County Council or otherwise, to see that existing houses are habitable and kept in a proper state of repair'.³⁶ To organise this the KRHC set up a General Committee to oversee various sub-committees which would carry out particular aspects of the campaign. These were Survey and Inspection which would survey streets and districts and subsequently inform the local authority of bad spots or repairs which were needed; Inquiry, which investigated the ownership of neglected property in order that the local authority could exercise its statutory powers against the right people; and Publicity which would circulate information and propaganda (in the parlance of the day) about housing conditions in order to waken public opinion to the problem.

The personnel of the Committee was composed almost entirely of unpaid workers. The chairman was the Rt.Hon Henry Hobhouse, his deputy was Reginald Rowe (the director of the Improved Tenements Association). The Honorary Secretaries were Rachel Alexander and Lady Maurice and the Treasurer, R.W.Dana OBE.³⁷ The only paid employee was Denby who took on this work in addition to that which she did for the KCSS.³⁸ By 1924 Rowe had been replaced by Lord Balfour of Burleigh, who sat on the borough council and in the House of Lords, and who would become a mainstay of the Kensington housing campaign, and at a national level as well.

³⁶ KCSS 'Objects, Constitution & Policy' file no. 18006, RBKCCL KHT collection, 18006/61 'Record of a Meeting, 10.11.22.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 18006/53.

³⁸ Denby's salary in 1925 was £250. *Annual Report*, 1925, RBKCCL KHT collection.

The KRHC was based at The Venture. Although it was an autonomous body within the KCSS, it very much continued the work of its predecessor but on a more permanent and organised basis. It was anxious to raise public awareness about housing conditions, however most of its time was spent conveying information to the borough council in the wake of reports from the survey group. The work of the Publicity Committee, to which Denby was additionally appointed Secretary, reflects this bias.³⁹ It had two roles, fund raising and lobbying local councillors about housing conditions.

This meant a busy workload for Denby, one which combined working for both the KCSS and the KRHC and its various committees. It did mean, however, that she was introduced from the start to the techniques of investigation and propaganda which would stand her in good stead in the 1930s. On many occasions she was asked to participate directly in the campaign. During the 1924 local election campaign she was directed to draw to the attention of candidates to housing conditions in north Kensington. This gives a useful indication of what being an Organising Secretary entailed; it was not just minute taking, it was activism as well.

But how successful was this? Despite endless lobbying and surveying, the Committee succeeded only in getting the council to agree to appoint women rent collectors.⁴⁰ For the most part the council remained indifferent. Its attitude is summarised in a comment made by the borough's Medical Officer of Health '...there are many objections to the local authority of any area becoming property owners on a large scale, and

³⁹ Minute Book of KRHC, RBKCCL KHT collection, no.17957, 19.4.23.

⁴⁰ KCSS *Annual Report*, 1925, RBKCCL KHT collection.

they have not felt disposed to acquire neglected and dilapidated houses except in cases where the dwellings could not be placed in good ownership by any other plan'.⁴¹ It did make some effort to deal with overcrowding in north Kensington; requiring all houses let in lodgings to be registered but its policy was generally one of minimal intervention. This was reflected in the borough's house building policy. In 1920 it estimated the number of new dwellings needed as 314; by 1927 317 units had been provided.⁴² Such a small number, given the extent of overcrowding in the area, was clearly inadequate, but reflected the Borough's preference to let others build, relying most heavily on London County Council activity.

The KRHC's policy of a small vanguard group directing most of its energies towards reminding the borough council of its duties was clearly inadequate.⁴³ In May 1925, a number of documents were circulated amongst the group's members which discussed what the future policy of the committee should be. These stressed the need to provide more information to the council, but also to direct the findings of the Committee to the public as a whole in order to bring greater pressure to bear on the local authority. One Paper 'A Housing Policy for the Kensington Borough Council' suggested that the KRHC might assist the council in collecting data as to the type of dwellings required and rents at which they might be available.⁴⁴ In respect of this, a memorandum added that the Committee might supplement this by passing information about the needs of individual families to the council. It also suggested that the

⁴¹ M.O.H.'s Report for 1923 quoted in GLC (1973), 350.

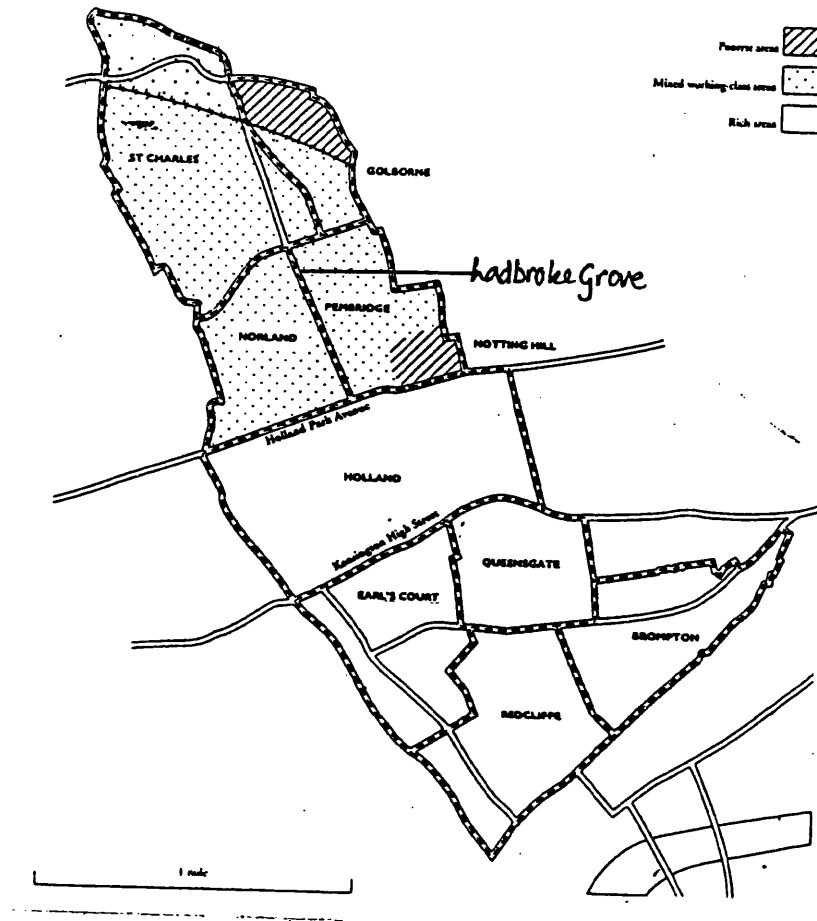
⁴² *Ibid*, 300.

⁴³ Its total membership never exceeded twenty.

⁴⁴ Kensington Housing Association 'Objects & Aims: Constitution' file, RBKCCL KHT collection; doc.no.18006/14.

Committee act as a clearing house for tenants, approaching the authorities but also other institutions such as the Peabody Trust and the ITA for admission for its 'clients'. Such action would require a larger and better-funded organisation and after more discussion it was decided to wind up the KRHC and replace it with a new body, the Kensington Housing Association which would undertake all these activities.

This decision came at a time when it was becoming apparent that it was not just at a local level that there was indifference to bad housing. At a national level too, central government was paying limited attention to the problem of the slums. A more concerted form of action was required. If neither local or central government was prepared to tackle a major social evil then it was the duty of the voluntary sector, both locally and nationally, to lead the way.



2.1: Map of Kensington

CHAPTER THREE

THE KENSINGTON YEARS

Part Two: The Kensington Housing Association and the Kensington Housing Trust, 1925-1928

The decision to mobilise greater public support for slum clearance at a local level in Kensington by the founding of the Kensington Housing Association (KHA) in 1925 and the Kensington Housing Trust (KHT) in 1926 formed a significant part of what would become an increasingly organised and coherent campaign against central government housing policy.¹ My concern in this chapter will be to chart the evolution of this campaign from the mid-1920s until 1928 and to explore the part played by the KHA/T and particularly Denby in developing a distinct approach to social housing and in the moves towards greater unity of action which would inaugurate a further phase in voluntary sector activity by the end of the decade.

The emphasis in the discussion will be three-fold. First, stress will be placed on the philosophy of housing developed within the sector in the inter-war decades. This may be described as determinedly interdisciplinary; its proponents sought to bring the skills and knowledge of individuals together to work in unity towards the resolution of a great social ill. This interdisciplinarity was seen as crucial to the permanent resolution of the housing problem. Second, and again this reflects the broad definition of

¹ A note on acronyms. As I shall explain, although the KHA and KHT were distinct organisations, they often acted together, hence when I discuss them 'collectively' I shall use the acronym KHA/T.

housing by the organisations under discussion here, reformers identified housing, what and who went in it, and the amenities constructed around it, as a means of creating better citizens. Third, the discussion will focus on emphasising the significant role played by women in the formulation of this philosophy of housing. It will be seen that although men dominated the organisational structure of the voluntary sector it was women like Denby and Rachel Alexander who were responsible for the day-to-day running of such groups and who contributed to the formulation of the policies which underpinned much of their propaganda and housing work because it was they who had first hand dealings with slum conditions and slum dwellers.

The discussion here makes clear that the evolution of the work of groups like the KRHC into the KHA and then into the pan-London New Homes for Old Group can be seen as a particularly good example of the application of the philosophy of the New Philanthropy. The lack of housing for the urban poor and the continued existence of slums was identified as a major social problem. The voluntary sector then sought to develop an appropriate form of new housing which would both meet the shortage and bring about an end to the slums. In doing this the sector offered a thorough indictment of post-war central government housing policy.

THE POST-WAR HOUSING PROBLEM

The resolution of housing shortage and the provision of decent housing for the working classes had formed a central element in plans for reconstruction by the National Government in 1918. Continued concern about the health of the nation as well as the need to replenish the

population after four years of war were amongst the factors which had led to the passing of the Housing (Addison) Act of 1919.² A further reason was the extremely high cost of building in the immediate post-war period which had stifled the speculative house building market, the traditional supplier of housing for rental. The 1919 Act, intended as a stop-gap measure while prices remained high, laid down for the first time the principle of state intervention through subsidy in the production and ownership of rented housing for the working classes. It also continued the wartime policy of rent control.

Traditionally state housing policy had been almost exclusively concerned with slum clearance and the facilitation of philanthropic and, latterly, local authority action to rehouse the poor. During the 1920s this approach was, more or less, abandoned in favour of attempts to rehouse the upper sections of the working class and demobilised soldiers who were perceived as a vocal threat to peaceful social relations. Such slum clearance as there was was minimal. Between 1919 and 1930 only about 11 thousand dwellings were pulled down and replaced and this was under the terms of the 1890 Housing Act not the Addison Act.³

There was some logic, besides political motivation, to the decision by Addison and subsequent housing ministers to focus on new building. Under both Conservative and Labour Governments the main type of dwelling constructed with subsidy was the two-storey cottage on estates at the edge of existing towns or cities. Such housing was aimed deliberately at

² See Orbach (1977) and Swenarton (1981) *passim* for a discussion of the context of the introduction of the Addison Act.

³ Merret (1979), 49.

the better-off working class in the belief that once their former homes were vacated the poorer sections of the working class would move in. This approach, known as 'filtering up', was preferred to the alternative of building for the very poorest because of the belief that the private sector would ultimately resume its role as house provider and neither party wished to be left with a huge stock of low-rate and unlettable housing on its hands when this happened.

Unfortunately 'filtering up' did not work in practice with the result that large sections of the working class remained housed in the most appalling conditions. The existing slums of 1918 were untouched whilst new slums were created as a result of the particular economic and social circumstances faced by the poor. The main problem was that although many of the working classes could afford the rents of houses on cottage estates which in London were a minimum of 11 shillings a week, their incomes were not sufficient to pay travel costs to work as well.⁴ This meant that they had to remain in accommodation which was close to their place of employment. There was also the considerable sector of the working class which was refused council housing because of the size of its families and there remained the large number of people who could not afford rent for anything but the most minimal of dwelling space. These three strata of the poor were crammed into whatever accommodation was available. The scarcity of rooms exacerbated the problem and created disproportionately high rents for the space inhabited. Multiple occupation

⁴ Merret (1979), 48. Llewellyn Smith (1930) gives the poverty line wage as 40s a week. In north Kensington the average wage was £2 10s a week. Since it was accepted that rent should not constitute more than one-fifth of family income the difficulty of making ends meet and paying an LCC rent on an income for a large family when only the father had an income becomes apparent.

of houses, with two or three families per floor in a house originally intended for single occupancy, became common. Any space available was inhabited, including cellars. Since few landlords made adaptations to sanitary facilities the most horrendous living conditions quickly developed.

This situation was apparent, at least to those in the voluntary sector, by the early 1920s. The formation of the KRHC in 1923 was a symptom of the recognition that despite the construction of many new dwellings, the urban (and indeed rural) poor, especially '...respectable working class people [who were] not "slum dwellers", though forced to live under slum conditions'⁵ were untouched by such reforms.⁶ Although the Addison Act was cut short in 1921, subsequent housing acts in 1923 and 1924 continued to focus their subsidy on new out-of-town estates, not slum clearance.

In the face of legislation which continued to overlook the issue of slum clearance, local and national authorities needed to be reminded of their duty to all their citizens. In one of the earliest books to offer a critique of post-war housing policy Amy Sayle argued for a new policy which would have '...as its immediate aim, a fit house, whether old or new, for every family, and as its ultimate aim, a re-planned Britain'. The best way to achieve this was 'an effective public demand that the thing shall be done - a demand which no politician will dare, and no statesman wish, to deny'.⁷ It would be ten years before Sayle's wish would even begin to be fulfilled.

⁵ KHA *Annual Report*, 1929, 5, RBKCCL KHT Collection.

⁶ Orbach (1977), 139 records 213, 821 dwellings constructed under the 1919 Act, of which 170, 090 were built by local authorities.

⁷ Sayle (1924), 17-18. Sayle was a former Housing Sub-Inspector in the Ministry of Health, later serving on the LCC's Housing Committee and as a representative of the Women Public Health Officers Association (see Spring Rice, 1939/1981).

In the meantime it was to be the voluntary sector which assumed responsibility for the provision of fit housing for the poor and the creation of the public demand to push the state towards its duty.

THE KENSINGTON HOUSING ASSOCIATION

It was to organise more effective action to ensure the redemption of the decent poor in north Kensington that the Kensington Housing Association was formed as a successor to the KRHC some time between April and June 1925.⁸ Whilst the KRHC had been essentially a small investigative committee, the KHA was intended as a specifically publicly-oriented organisation whose priority was to amass the weight of public opinion which would force the borough council to action.

The new emphasis on the inclusion of the public in their work required of the Association a much larger organising committee than that of the KRHC. The KHA would be run by an Executive Committee of no more than thirty people with four Officers, a Chairman, vice-Chairman, Honorary Treasurer and Secretary, and a paid secretary who would be appointed by the Executive Committee.⁹ In addition, the Committee was empowered to co-opt a maximum of five members and to appoint sub-committees. It was responsible to the membership who could stand for election and discuss policy at the Association's AGM.

⁸ KHA Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee & Minutes of the Executive Committee - April-July 1925. Respectively, RBKCCL KHT Collection, no's 17597 & 18008/116. There seems to have been some overlap between the winding up of the KRHC and the launching of the KHA.

⁹ RBKCCL KHT Collection, KHA Constitution leaflet, no.18006/20

The first Executive Committee to be appointed contained many who had already served on the KRHC. Henry Hobhouse became its Chairman and Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the vice-Chairman. The Honorary Treasurer was R.W.Dana, and the Honorary Secretary, Lady Maurice. There were twenty four committee members many of whom had previously belonged to the KRHC. As had been the case at the KCSS and KRHC Denby was the only paid worker having become Organising Secretary of the KHA, a duty she shared with her work for the KCSS.

In the publicity leaflets published to announce the formation of the new group the KHA made clear its aim which was 'to focus public opinion in such a manner as to assist the Authorities to carry out their responsibilities by making full use of the powers entrusted to them'. This would happen because it was 'the plain duty of residents in the Royal Borough to deal effectively with the admittedly serious problem which exists in their midst, and to remove a reproach which must always be greater in a neighbourhood like this, where comfort and squalor exist side by side and form so vivid and disturbing a contrast'. Potential members were reminded of the implications should this problem go unsolved: 'The health of many working class families in North Kensington is being undermined by bad housing conditions, and among all the causes of social unrest the housing problem is one of the principal factors'. The minimum subscription was one shilling, although it was hoped people would give more in order 'to help the Association to become a thoroughly effective body'.¹⁰

¹⁰ KHA leaflets, 1925, RBKCCL KHT Collection.

Many of the activities of the KHA were the same as those of the KRHC. It continued to inform the Medical Officer of Health about insanitary houses, and wrote to the borough council offering its assistance 'if and when required'.¹¹ Whilst previously it had been the KRHC which gathered statistics, under the Association the membership itself was encouraged to gather information and campaign. Another new area of work was the attempt to find new accommodation for the slum dwellers themselves. The Association also made links with other housing groups in London.¹² In October 1925 the Executive Committee met with the Committees of the Westminster and Chelsea housing associations and agreed to continue to discuss common policy via their secretaries.¹³ This would provide the groundwork for later concerted action.

In the 1924 elections the KRHC had lobbied for awareness of the borough's housing problems, similarly in the 1925 local election the Association took every opportunity to do so again. The Association needed to persuade a Kensington run by Municipal Reformers, 'conservatives of yesteryear who had not changed with the times', to agree to press for a proper borough policy on housing.¹⁴ This was a considerable challenge. Kensington's rates were amongst the lowest in London; more housing would cost money. The campaigners also had to strike a balance between pricking consciences and being antagonistic. Denby noted 'No borough likes to see its dirty

¹¹ KHA *Annual Report* 1926, RBKCCL, KHT collection.

¹² Similar organisations to the KHA were established in, amongst other places, St.Pancras, Bethnal Green, Fulham, as well as Chelsea and Westminster. There is very little historical writing on the housing work of the voluntary sector in the inter-war period. That which there is tends to focus either on the large philanthropic organisations like the Peabody Trust or be entirely organisational in its focus, eg.Baker (1976), the exception being Garside (1994). This is a considerable oversight since, as is suggested here, this sector's work was very influential on post-war social policy.

¹³ Executive Committee minutes, 21.9.25, *Annual Report* 1925-6

¹⁴ Memorandum by Major Arthur Bathurst, 16.6.25, RBKCCL KHT Collection, 18006/12.

linen washed in public', recalling the unpleasant experience of being publicly 'cut' by members of council.¹⁵ The Association chose to attack the campaign from several angles. As before, members addressed party political meetings and lobbied candidates. A new technique, reflecting its broader remit as a publicly-focused group, was to put on a display of models of good and bad housing in two Kensington shops, one of which was lent by the Gas, Light and Coke Company, with the aim of influencing voters. If the *Annual Report* for 1925-6 is to be believed, the campaign was successful in that many of the candidates returned had pledged to support an active housing policy for the borough. Its success may be better measured by the fact that by the end of Association first year's work, it had amassed 498 members who had subscribed and donated just over three hundred and fifty eight pounds.

The coordination of all this work was Denby's job. She was the first port of call for citizens who had information about bad housing or those who were seeking help. It meant an extremely heavy workload but one which brought her first hand knowledge of slum conditions and slum dwellers. It is not surprising that when she later described this period of her life she wrote: 'the seven years I spent in [housing] work were exhaustingly, fiercely interesting...With the confidence born of interest and an intense desire to help, I turned my hand to every problem, direct and indirect, concerned with the housing conditions and difficulties of the "working people" with whom I worked...'.¹⁷

¹⁵ DP, 'Apprenticeship'.

¹⁶ KHA *Annual Report*, 1925-6, RBKCCL KHT collection.

¹⁷ DP, 'Apprenticeship'. The seven years seem to correspond to 1926 when she took on the full-time secretaryship of the KHA/ T and 1933 when she resigned.

There is a good amount of evidence to confirm Denby's description of her active role within the Association. When the young Elizabeth Halton became a volunteer in the KHA office in Portobello Road in 1930 she noted that '[Elizabeth Denby's] brilliant ferocious brain made the office a whirlpool of activity, arguments, disagreement and vitality'.¹⁸ In her obituary of Denby, she also recalled how 'her office fizzed with energy, new ideas and alarming outburst...Elizabeth, always two jumps ahead of everyone else, impossible to catch up with, unpredictable, immensely stimulating'.¹⁹ As far as Pepler was concerned it was Denby with Balfour of Burleigh and Rachel Alexander who were the prime movers within the Association. The Association itself acknowledged the significance of Denby's work when it reported her resignation '...much of the success of its [the Association's] work can be attributed to her energy and initiative, combined with her intimate knowledge of housing conditions in Kensington'.²⁰

At the beginning of 1926 the Committee took stock of the first six months of work. The KHA was by then firmly established and attracting a good number of members. It was now the time to focus in detail on what the Association's policy should be. A memorandum by Balfour followed by much discussion led to the publication of a new policy document in the early part of the year.²¹ This new statement had five central aims. The first priority was to collect and make known the facts of the Housing situation

¹⁸ Pepler (1996b). Elizabeth Halton would later become vice-chairman of the Housing Centre and an LCC Councillor. She was also married to the town planner George Pepler.

¹⁹ Pepler (1966), 9.

²⁰ KHA *Annual Report*, 1933, RBKCCL KHT Collection.

²¹ Confidential Memorandum by Lord Balfour of Burleigh, c. Jan.1926, RBKCCL KHT Collection, 18006/19.

in Kensington.²² The Association would also do all in its powers to assist or encourage private bodies such as public utility societies, and support local authorities in the building of new housing. Included in its offer of support to both the borough council and the London County Council was to assist in checking overcrowded houses and to ensure the prompt registration of all tenement houses. There was also a formal commitment to co-operate with other housing associations in or near London.

Just as this revision of policy was underway the Association was offered a new challenge. As part of its campaign to ensure the improvement of houses in multiple occupancy, the KHA had approached the Great Western Railway Company (GWR), the ground landlords of some tenement properties in Wornington Road, Kensal Town, to force their lessees to carry out structural and sanitary improvements. These houses were typical of the subdivided accommodation of the area, containing one family per room over three storeys and basements, with only one lavatory in the yard and a tap on the stairs. Rather to the surprise of the KHA, the GWR's Manager responded by suggesting that it should take over the ground lease and carry out the improvements itself.²³ This raised the possibility of a completely new area of work for the Association. A confluence of similar offers during the spring and summer of 1926 helped push the Association towards the decision to form a group to build housing for north Kensington's poor.

²² KHA Statement of Policy, 1926, RBKCCL KHT Collection, 18006/2.

²³ Pepler (1996b), KHA *Annual Report* 1926.

As early as 1924 there had been suggestions that the KRHC should build itself, perhaps in connection with the Improved Tenements Association.²⁴ At that time the proposal had been dismissed as impossible, but the offer by the GWR opened new possibilities. In addition, the Association was becoming increasingly conscious of the problem of finding accommodation for people who came to it for help. The 1926 *Annual Report* noted that of the many urgent cases reported to the Association it had been possible to find new housing only for a few. These were rare successes. For the most part, the Association found it impossible to find suitable dwellings at affordable rents, nor could organisations like the Peabody and Guinness Trust 'hold out any hope of accommodating these unfortunate people for a very long time'.²⁵

The Association decided to hold meetings with its membership to gauge its support for the formation of a housing trust. An initial meeting was held in April at which the issue 'obtained so much support'.²⁶ A fortnight later the Executive Committee was informed that the Improved Tenements Association was unable to develop a plot of land given to it by Mrs Schuster (a member of the KHA).²⁷ Under its present constitution the KHA was not able to own property. If it chose to accept the GWR's offer, and Mrs Schuster's gift of land it would need to form a public utility society to enable it to buy land and build new homes for the poor. The revised policy of the KHA had envisaged the Association encouraging others to build, not itself. The formation of a housing society would

²⁴ A suggestion made by Miss Gertrude Eaton, 28.5.25, Minutes of Finance & General Purposes Committee, KHA, RBKCCL KHT collection, no.17957.

²⁵ KHA *Annual Report* 1926, RBKCCL, KHT Collection.

²⁶ Letter dated 25.6.26, Executive Committee Agendas, RBKCCL KHT collection, 18008/41.

²⁷ Executive Committee Minutes, 29.4.26, RBKCCL KHT collection, no.17949.

represent a distinct shift in policy. At a second meeting held in July the matter was discussed again. The extent of support for the establishment of a society became clear when the membership subscribed nearly eight thousand pounds, some as gifts or interest free loans, the rest lent at four per cent.²⁸ Faced with such overwhelming support the Executive Committee agreed that it was time to accept these offers and form the Kensington Housing Trust.

THE KENSINGTON HOUSING TRUST

After negotiations with the GWR the leases of some of the properties in Wornington Road were handed over in November 1926, and Mrs Schuster's offer of land also officially accepted. The Kensington Housing Trust first met on the 19th May 1927 and it was registered as a public utility society on the 8th June. At the same time it was affiliated to the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, the main body then working in the interests of public utility housing societies. Although the Trust was a legally separate body from the KHA, in effect it was the same organisation since its Management Committee shared personnel with the KHA's Executive Committee. Balfour, Hobhouse, Dana, Rowe and Alexander were all officers and Denby was appointed acting secretary to the Trust. This meant that she now held three secretarial jobs; an intolerable amount of work which led her to resign from the KCSS at the end of 1927. She subsequently worked solely for the KHA/T until 1933.²⁹

²⁸ Draft *Annual Report* for 1926, RBKCCL KHT collection, 18007/67.

²⁹ The KHA and KHT were merged in 1936, since when the organisations have been known as the Kensington Housing Trust.

The KHT was formed 'to give practical effect to the aims of the KHA'.³⁰ In doing so it developed a set of practices which became typical of the voluntary housing sector as a whole. Many of these would ultimately be absorbed into state housing policy after the end of ^{the} war in 1945, especially the sector's conceptualisation of housing as a set of activities rather than merely being concerned with bricks and mortar. The Management Committee gave itself two specific remits: the provision of new dwellings at low rents and the mitigation of overcrowding by skilled management.³¹ This work was aimed at the two main sections of the working class overlooked by state housing policy. Those whom Denby described as 'the very decent but heavily [financially] handicapped workers in whom we are interested' and 'another class of people in North Kensington - organ grinders, flower sellers, street hawkers...who must live somewhere'.³² For the former, new dwellings would be constructed and let at low rents so that they could live close to their work in decent surroundings. For the latter, the KHT would work in collaboration with the Improved Tenements Association to take over, recondition and render their existing accommodation habitable. For both classes, the guiding principle was the desire to '...civilise people who haven't had a decent chance of getting civilised'.³³ By 1931 the KHT had provided accommodation of both sorts for just over 1500 people, including five new blocks of flats.

The reconditioning work carried out by the Trust was based on the principles developed by Octavia Hill in the 1870s which stressed the need

³⁰ Executive Agenda, KRHC, RBKCCL KHT collection, 18008/16.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Notes on Proposed Rents of Flats in Mary Place by Miss E. Denby, RBKCCL KHT collection.

³³ Speech by Sir Reginald Rowe, on the opening of the Housing Centre in 1934. Housing Centre Trust archives, file c/5.

to deal with the housing problem from both a practical and personal point of view. Both the tenants and their homes needed to be improved. This could be achieved by the development of a mutual relationship between tenant and landlord, or landlord's representative in the form of women who managed the blocks of flats. In return for prompt payment of rent and clean habits, the tenants were entitled to prompt repairs and improvements by the landlord.³⁴ At Wornington Road, the houses were improved by the addition of a bathroom, an extra sink on the first landing and increased lavatory accommodation. These were let at rents of four shillings and sixpence for a front room and three shillings and sixpence for a back room. The renovated rooms were intended to be either permanent homes or serve as 'an invaluable training ground for families able to reach the standard of home-making that can take advantage of the amenities of well-equipped flats...'.³⁵ As the quotation suggests, this was intended to inculcate a sense of personal responsibility in the tenants, to enable them to discover their potential to live decently. If they demonstrated this they might then move on to a purpose-built flat. If they were unable to respond, they would remain in reconditioned housing where they would benefit from the guidance of the trained woman housing manager 'whose friendship and wise influence...has had results of the highest value'.³⁶

Such an attitude towards its tenants reveals how deep-rooted class divisions remained in the inter-war period and reinforce the observation made in chapter two that however keen organisations like the KHA and

³⁴ See Brion (1995) for a discussion of Hill's system.

³⁵ KHT Ltd (1937), 7.

³⁶ KHA *Annual Report*, 1931, RBKCCL KHT collection.

KHT were to bring out the potential of the working classes, in practice they held a highly compartmentalised view of precisely who ^{did} and who did not deserve help. It becomes clear from a reading of the literature of similar organisations in this period that such views were commonly-held and in fact underpinned most charitable work, reflecting the prevalence of biological conceptions of society.³⁷ The true focus of their work was the 'decent' poor, the hawkers and casual workers deserved help but of a less benevolent kind than their immediate superiors. Although several 'species' of working classes existed, it is clear from the language used by organisations like the KHA that, ultimately, the class as a whole was perceived as an 'other' who needed to be brought to a certain state of decency and participation in democracy but who, at no time, could be viewed as equals.

It should be noted, however, that despite this deep rooted classism the Trust had recognised a valuable concept in housing; that families who had become accustomed to living in one or two rooms required assistance and guidance in the transition to a new, spacious flat. The KHT's concern to provide such support for its tenants distinguished it from the majority of local authorities in this period who were extremely reluctant to implement the Hill management system.³⁸ It also recognised that in order to prevent reconditioned or new accommodation from becoming a slum again tenants required support, not just from lady managers, but also with their finances.

³⁷ An approach which I will discuss further in chapter 6.

³⁸ Brion & Tinker (1980), 71, record that by 1936 only 46 women housing managers were employed by local authorities. They do not give such precise figures for private bodies, but note that women managed 2,500 properties for the Church Commissioners, 2000 for the Crown Commissioners, and 6000 for private owners and trusts.

This type of help was developed in the management of the new blocks of flats constructed by the Trust. If the type of families for whom it wanted to build were to be able to afford to live in the flats, the rents charged needed to be sufficiently low that the families need not make sacrifices in order to pay it. The Management Committee spent much time debating what rents should be paid. As part of this discussion Denby wrote a paper on proposed rents for the Trust's first block of flats, Crosfield House. The report she prepared is the first surviving example of her contribution to housing policy within the Trust and gives an early indication of the meticulous research she would devote to each project.³⁹ In it she differentiated between the different types of working-class family incomes. Whilst families with grown-up unmarried children who contributed to the family income, and those with one child or very young children, could afford the rents (^{twenty one} shillings to ^{twenty five} shillings a week) charged by the LCC, Peabody and Sutton Trusts, men with large families of young or adolescent children who might not yet be contributing to the family income, had wages which barely covered food, clothes and fares. Often the mother had to go out to work, though this was regrettable. To spend the accepted standard of one fifth of their income on rent was a high proportion, but they were not being built for by anybody but the Trust 'nor are they likely to be for some time'. She suggested that rents (including rates) of ^{eight} shillings, ^{ten} shillings and ^{twelve} shillings should be charged, the more expensive flats being the largest. She argued that a small family could easily afford ^{eight} shillings out of a ^{forty five} shilling income, whereas a husband, wife and five adolescent children could not afford more than ^{twelve} shillings out of a ^{sixty} shilling income. The published rents of the Crosfield

³⁹ Notes on Proposed Rents of Flats in Mary Place by Miss E. Denby, RBKCCL KHT collection.

House flats were actually higher (a four-roomed flat let at ^{fourteen} ~~14~~ shillings and sixpence a week), but a decision taken in 1929 meant that not all tenants paid full rents, thus ensuring that their target audience was reached. In an early example of the implementation of differential rents it was decided that Trust rents should not exceed one fifth of income, and if they did they would be adjusted accordingly.⁴⁰ This predated the introduction of discretionary provision of rent rebates introduced by the 1930 Housing Act; a provision which the LCC chose not to enact.⁴¹

Assistance with rent would mean that the respectable poor could be released from slum accommodation (which could then be reconditioned by the ITA) and enabled to live decently once they had moved in. In order to further assist tenants the Management Committee, at the suggestion of Rachel Alexander, also set up a furniture-loan scheme to enable tenants to buy new furniture for their homes. In 1931 a benevolent fund was established for tenants which provided holidays and convalescent homes for those in need. This form of subsidy was made possible by the manner in which the KHT, and many other housing associations, raised their funds. Whenever possible the Trust tried to acquire its money 'free' through gifts, legacies, or cheap loans. Public Utility Societies were also eligible for subsidy under the Housing Acts of 1924 (and later the 1930 Act) and the KHT made use of this for some of the blocks. A further fund-raising method was to issue loan stock to members at a rate of between two and a half and four per cent interest.

⁴⁰ Paper on differential rents in file of KHT leaflets, 18025/5, RBKCCL KHT collection.

⁴¹ LCC (1931), 104-105.

For many of the first blocks built it was gifts of money that enabled the purchase of sites and initial construction to go ahead. Crosfield House was named after a Mr and Mrs Crosfield who, having attended a meeting at which Lloyd George and Lord Balfour spoke, went to the Trust office and donated twenty thousand pounds to buy the plot of land in Mary Place, in the heart of the Potteries,^{which} the Trust had an option to buy.⁴² Crosfield House was opened in 1929. Two years later it was joined by Queen's Gate and St.Peter's House in Silchester Road, Notting Dale [3.1].

These two blocks were typical of the accommodation tenants could expect from the Trust. Each contained both three and four-roomed flats. These had a coal range in the living room, as well as a gas cooker and copper in the scullery [3.2]. There was a bathroom and cupboards were built in. This type of provision was similar to that provided under the 'normal' plans for LCC flats of a similar date [3.3]. The Trust made space for pram and bicycle storage and when there was a large enough site playgrounds were built. Tenants were also encouraged to have flower boxes^{and} later some allotments were provided.

Although such facilities and subsidies were made possible by 'free' money and the small scale on which the Trust worked, it is important to stress the significance of the range of practices the Trust brought within the remit of its housing work. The Committee recognised that the Trust's responsibility did not, indeed should not, end once the tenants had been rehoused. In fact its work had only just begun. If tenants were to be taken out of the slums and their new homes remain pristine they required long

⁴² Pepler (1996b).

term assistance through management, strategic financial assistance and mutual co-operation. In this way the tenants would rediscover the potential which had been lost in the slime of the slums and become the useful citizens contemporary society required.

There is little evidence to show that Denby was directly involved in the running of the Trust although she would have attended all its meetings in her capacity of secretary. The fact that she wrote the paper on rents does, however, suggest that her opinion was sought and valued on occasion. Where her participation is much more clearly evident is in the work of the KHA, especially from 1928 onwards. This can probably be attributed to the fact that other members of the Committee were now having to concentrate on the work of the KHT. Minutes of meetings between 1928 and 1933 record Denby taking an increasingly public role within the Association. She became directly involved in housing conferences and publicity work for the Trust, a process which culminated in her role as the organiser of the first two New Homes for Old exhibitions and, on a personal level, the establishment of some powerful contacts.

THE ASSOCIATION RESUMES WORK

The establishment of the KHT had not only taken up a great deal of the KHA's energies during 1926 and 1927, it also entailed a broadening of the Association's work once the Trust was fully functional. In addition to the general work of raising awareness of the housing problem in north Kensington the Association now became responsible for raising funds for the KHT to build and the interviewing and visiting of local residents in need of rehousing either in the Trust's properties, or those owned by the

LCC and other housing trusts. This expansion of the Association's work led to some reorganisation and the appointment of a part-time secretary to assist Denby. The workload was also mitigated by at least half a dozen members, all female, who did voluntary work in the office and visited local residents.⁴³ The existence of such a pool of labour of ladies who did not have to earn a living remained an invaluable resource for the voluntary sector in the inter-war period although it increasingly employed and paid trained workers like Denby.

Each area of work brought Denby and the Association's workers into close contact with the realities of slum life, particularly from visiting the homes of those who had applied to the office for rehousing.⁴⁴ Each family was visited in order to check that the information given at the office was accurate. They were then classified according to the severity of their case: 'very urgent', 'urgent' and 'ordinary'. Once categorised the Association then either reported problems to the appropriate authorities or tried to find the residents new dwellings. In the year 1929-30 it managed to house 177 families in this way, the majority in the property of the Sutton Dwellings Trust. Four were accepted by the KHT.⁴⁵

The work of the Applications sub-committee not only enabled the rehousing of some of the applicant families it also provided the Association's propagandists with data about housing conditions in north Kensington. This was used in their publicity work to sting the consciences

⁴³ The *Annual Report* for 1929 thanks Misses Egerton Warburton, Stewart Smith, Freda Collins, Farrington, Russell (two sisters) and Tufton, for their help.

⁴⁴ During 1928 to 1929 they received 1,672 forms. KHA *Annual Report*, 1929, RBKCCL KHT collection.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Of the applications, 514 were placed as very urgent, whilst 11 families were rejected on account of character.

of potential donors. Various techniques were used to convey information to the public. Chief amongst these was the *Annual Report* which was sent to all members. This documented the Association and Trust's activities over the year, and listed the donors to both groups. It also gave case-histories of families who had applied to the Association. The emphasis in these accounts was invariably placed on the essential decency of those in need of help; the mothers always kept the home clean and the children well cared for despite the fact they lived in one room. Another method was to reprint letters from those seeking new accommodation before and after their problems were resolved. A motor driver on two hundred pounds a year described his one-room home 'which I think is not healthy and we have a lot of black beetles [sic] and mice, and at the back of us there is a pig-yard...which smells very bad at times, and our children don't seem to get on very well...'. Miss Alexander was able to find them a flat on a Peabody Estate. He wrote in thanks: '...we are so happy and comfortable. The wife would be so pleased if you could spare some time and come and see her in her new flat. We have plenty of room for the children to play and the air here seems so different to what it did in Portland Road'.⁴⁶ The use of such contrasts was a favourite practice, reminding the membership of what might be if they would donate to the Association.

This message was also conveyed through meetings and leaflets. In 1928 it was decided to decentralise the work of the Association and devolve some work, especially the gathering of members and funds, to committees based in the electoral wards of Kensington. Each had a convener whose task was to work in the way best suited to its particular area. The most common

⁴⁶ Correspondence between 'W.A.' and Rachel Alexander reproduced in KHA *Annual Report*, 1929, RBKCCL KHT collection.

technique used by the ward committees was the drawing-room meeting where the contrast between the comfort of the setting and those of the conditions being described by a speaker would, it was hoped, encourage a conscience to stir. This method was enhanced with the addition of a film to the KHA's propaganda machine. It seems that the KHA would ultimately have at least two films for propaganda purposes, demonstrating how adept the voluntary housing sector was at incorporating the new mass media of cinema into its armoury.⁴⁷ One survives called *Kensington Calling*. A silent film, it juxtaposes images of north Kensington with text. Its message and technique was very much the same as in the *Annual Reports*. Scenes show inhabitants of overcrowded housing fetching water from the yard, returning to insect and rat-infested rooms. A coffin maker is shown fashioning a child's coffin. Then there are shots of Crosfield House and Queen's Gate House and St.Peter's House under construction. The final shot shows another slum street with the message 'Help erase these blots on the honour of our borough'.

Alongside drawing-room meetings, the Association organised Housing Sundays when clergymen across the borough were encouraged to preach on the housing conditions in the north to the comfortably accommodated citizens of South Kensington. These seem to have been particularly effective. It was hearing Canon Woodward, later Bishop of Worcester, preach on housing at St.Peter's Cranley Gardens that led Elizabeth Halton to volunteer to help out at the Portobello Road office, thus starting a

⁴⁷ The 1929 *Annual Report* refers to a film having being made but does not say precisely when. Executive Committee minutes record an offer from the London Film Guild to make a film in July of that year, it may be the same film. The film *Kensington Calling*, shows the Silchester Road flats under construction and since they probably were not begun until 1930, it seems likely that this was a second film, the other is, presumably, lost. The National Film Archive has a listing only for *Kensington Calling*.

lifelong career in housing and politics. This sermon, in February 1930, also raised 6 thousand pounds towards the flats in Silchester Road, hence one was named St. Peter's House.

On occasion the separate ward committees combined to make one big fundraising in effort. In June 1931 a garden fete was held at 8 Addison Road, the home of Sir Ernest and Lady Debenham. Here another publicity technique was used, attendance by celebrities. The Association had already succeeded in getting royalty to open its new blocks of flats, the Duchess of York opened Crosfield House in July 1929. Now it benefited from 'Artists, musicians, actors and actresses [who] combined to help us'.⁴⁸ These included the designer Mrs Darcy Braddell, with whom Denby would subsequently work on several occasions in the 1930s, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Eric Kennington and Ernest Thesiger. Amongst those running stalls were Mrs Victor Gollancz on books, and Mrs Robert van den Berg on 'smashum-bashum'.⁴⁹ The event raised ^{five hundred and twenty seven} 500 pounds. In the same way that the sector continued to rely on unpaid workers, so too it remained indebted to those wealthy families and individuals who provided much of the funding for the new philanthropy before its work gained state funding.

Most of these activities were aimed at attracting publicity within Kensington, but the work of the KHA/T was also noted outside the borough. In many of the books on housing of the period the KHT is mentioned, and it was occasionally written about in the national press.⁵⁰ *The Spectator*, for example, had a feature article on the Trust in 1927 by

⁴⁸ KHA *Annual Report*, 1931, RBKCCL KHT collection.

⁴⁹ The van den Berg family were one of the main sponsors of the Pioneer Health Centre a project with which Denby was closely involved, see chapter 6.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Townroe (1930), *The Listener* (1933a), LCC (1937).

B.S.Townroe. His report shares the tone of the KHA reports in its emphasis on the redemptive aspect of its work. In his description of two families who had been rehoused in the newly reconditioned rooms at Wornington Road, he wrote 'Imagine the joy of the two mothers to see their children living under decent conditions'.⁵¹ Revealingly, he quotes one of the new tenants: 'I thought it was the Borough Council making my home so decent and being so generous about it!'.⁵² This suggests that however efficient the Association was at informing others about its work, it had forgotten to tell its own residents.

Perhaps the most interesting, and innovative, piece of propaganda work carried out by the Association at this time was its scheme for the replanning of Kensington. In February 1932 the Executive Committee received a memorandum from an Austen Hall which suggested that a Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) panel of unemployed architects be asked by the Association to carry out a survey of Kensington.⁵³ It was decided to form a sub-committee to meet with the RIBA to discuss the matter further. To this Denby, Balfour, Alexander and two other members of the Association were deputed. They met with the architects during April when it was discovered that what was intended by the RIBA was a sociological rather than a town-planning scheme. In response to a request from the KHA representatives the RIBA agreed to consider how far things could be altered towards a more planning-oriented approach. Maurice Webb was appointed go-between and was

⁵¹ Townroe (1927), 1142. Townroe was the chair of Hampstead's Housing Committee and a co-opted member of the LCC Housing Committee, as well as the author of several books and articles on slum in the late 1920s and 1930s. Source, evidence supplied to Departmental Committee on Housing (Moyne Committee), March 1933, PRO, HLG 49/7.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ KHA Executive Committee minutes, 12.2.32, RBKCCL.KHT collection, no.17949.

clearly successful. By July, minutes record that Mr Burford of the RIBA was working on the zoning and lay-out plans for parts of north Kensington.

The decision to 'commission' this plan is further evidence of the broad range of tools the KHA thought necessary to achieve its aim of eliminating bad housing and slums. Central government was yet to acknowledge the concept that the wholesale replanning of districts might form a vital element in any slum clearance programme. In the leaflet issued to publicise the plan the KHA made the case for town planning. 'Town Planning is not a luxury; it is an urgent necessity if future generations are to avoid a recurrence of our problems'. It continued 'Town Planning is a supremely productive social investment on which the interest is expressed in terms of the health, happiness and increased efficiency of the generation reared under good housing conditions'.⁵⁴

Burford's plan, which was completed in 1932, covered the area south of the metropolitan line, and to the west of Clarendon Road. The new plan was intended to abolish overcrowding and increase the amount of open space in the area. It proposed, therefore, the demolition of the densely-packed streets and replaced them with large blocks of housing on the superblock model. The building of the housing would be by local authorities or housing societies in accordance with the town plan. To complete the scheme a major arterial road was proposed across the top of the site. This was intended to link up the Western Avenue with the streets around Paddington Station in order to create an easier western exit

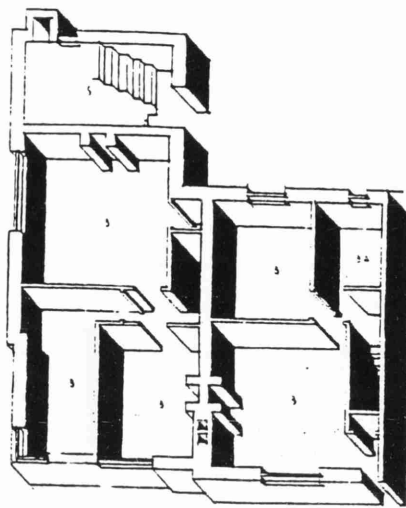
⁵⁴ KHA leaflet in RBKCCL KHT collection, 18025/46, called 'Chaos or Planning', 1933, which shows the plan. See also Denby (1933b) and Fletcher (1934).

from central London. Other larger roads would be cut through the site to remove heavy traffic from residential streets. [3.4].

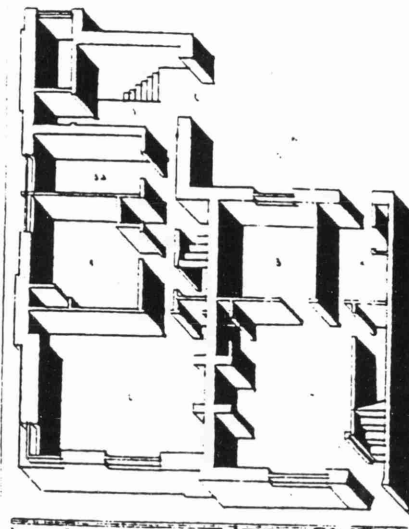
In the same way that the KHT and the KHA were developing an approach to rehousing which brought together a variety of techniques - reconditioning, new building, housing management, differential rates, townplanning - they also became involved in work to bring together the skills and ideas developed by other similar groups in London with the ultimate aim of pushing the issue of slums deeper into the public psyche in order to make central government adopt a clear strategy towards the slum problem. This united campaign was intimately related to the changing political climate in Britain by the late 1920s and Denby was central to its success.



3.1: Queen's Gate House, Kensington Architects T. Shearer Smith and S. Cameron Kirby



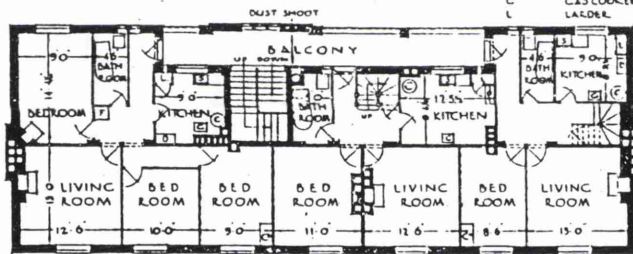
TYPE PLAN: FIRST FLOOR



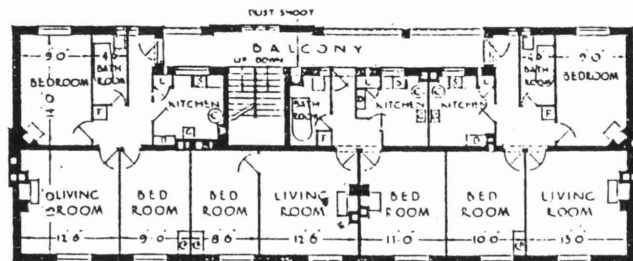
TYPE PLAN: GROUND FLOOR

TOPMOST FLOOR

REFERENCE: P DENOTES BATH WITH
TUB & TOP
C CUPBOARD
C* CUPBOARD
D DRESSER
F FUEL
C GAS COOKER
L LADDER



2 STOREY LETTINGS IN TOPMOST FLOOR & ONE FLOOR BELOW.



FLATS ON FLOORS BETWEEN GROUND
& 2 STOREY LETTINGS

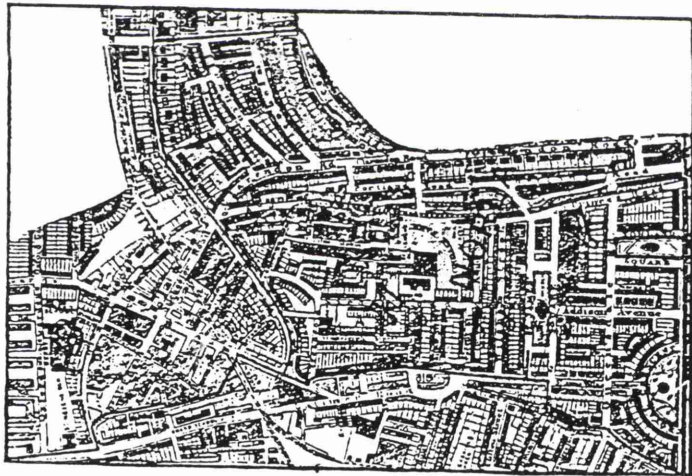
Scale of Feet
G. TOPHAM FORREST
ARCHITECT TO THE COUNCIL

THE NEW BLOCK DWELLINGS—NORMAL PLANNING.

3.2: Plan of Queen's Gate House

3.3: Plan of LCC flats

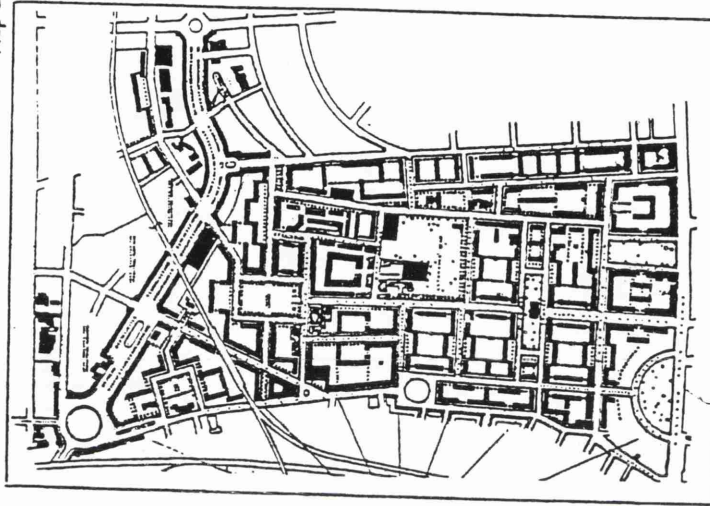
CH A O S



Map A

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Map B



— OR PLANNING?

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KENSINGTON YEARS

Part Three: New Homes for Old, 1928-33

The failure of central government for most of the 1920s to deal with the slum problem had caused the voluntary sector to take the lead in bringing the issue to public attention and in developing new techniques for the rehousing of former slum dwellers, a process exemplified in the evolution of the KCSS' housing sub-committee into the KHA/T between 1920 and 1926. In 1928, however, circumstances began to change. Believing that sufficient houses had been built to meet the post-war shortage, the Conservative government committed itself to the resumption of the pre-war sanitary policy of slum clearance and the reduction of rent controls in the parliamentary session of 1928 to 1929. This initiated a seven year period during which successive governments dismantled the subsidy system introduced by the housing acts of 1919, 1923 and 1924 and replaced it with legislation for major programmes of slum clearance. In response, the voluntary housing sector in London underwent many significant changes. In these Denby and other women workers in the sector played a major role.

TOWARDS UNITY OF ACTION

Even before this indication of a shift in position by central government had taken place voluntary housing associations in London had started to reassess their work. The main reason for this was that many were faced with considerable problems in raising the necessary funds for building.

The reliance of most groups on donations and share issues which depended on the charitable will of others (hence, partly, the emphasis on consciousness raising), made it difficult to ensure regular funding, whilst provision of subsidy under the housing acts depended on the discretion of local authorities. In order to try and work through some of these problems, the London groups began to explore ways of combining for more effective action in raising funds. In March 1928, under the auspices of the Garden City and Town Planning Association (GCTPA), the first collective meeting of London's public utility societies took place at Magdalen College Mission in Somers Town. This discussed the various problems which faced housing societies - how to finance their work to house the very poorest^{and} property management - and debated the possibility of offering the services of their skilled property managers as a means to secure the reconditioning of property by private owners. Proposals were also considered for a central appeal for funds.¹ By the end of the meeting it had been decided to form of committee of members of the GCTPA to consider the suggestions made and report back to a further meeting.

Amongst those attending this conference were Denby and Rachel Alexander, representing the KHT. Henceforth, presence at these and similar conferences would become an important part of Denby's work, initiating a series of contacts with like-minded women (and, to a lesser degree, men) and through the pages of the GCTPA's journal a thorough

¹ *Garden Cities & Town Planning*, (1928a), 90-91. It was also attended by representatives from the Improved Tenements Association, Saint Pancras House Improvement Society (SPHIS), the Bethnal Green Housing Association and the GCTPA.

acquaintanceship with developments in housing abroad.² The KHA was sympathetic to these moves towards greater cooperation. Following the March conference Rachel Alexander pressed the case for more unified work amongst housing associations; with Denby she would be the mainstay of Kensington's contribution to this cause.³ One immediate outcome of this proposal was Denby's attendance, with Alexander, at the National Conference of Public Utility Societies held in Welwyn Garden City in May.⁴ Discussion focused mainly on issues pertaining to the running of voluntary housing groups: management, rent and the family, and building prices, for example. Rather dry, but such information would provide Denby with a useful arsenal of facts for her later career.

In June 1928, a second meeting of London housing societies was held at which a decision was taken against making a central appeal for funding; instead members elected to examine ways in which the societies and the GCTPA might work together more effectively.⁵ The ultimate aim was twofold: to improve the organisation of the London societies by sharing knowledge and fund-raising techniques, and to campaign for more public awareness of the slums and the work of those groups which were working to improve them. This vote to pursue a policy of publicity through collective organisation represents the realisation that whilst individual societies could achieve much on a local scale, activity needed to be

² Awareness of housing policy on the Continent abroad, especially those developed by modernists, is usually seen as having been exclusively purveyed by the architectural press of the 1930s. However a cursory survey of the GCTPA's journal reveals, for example, articles on its visits to housing in Holland and Germany (Jan.1929) and on the Frankfurt Kitchen design of Grette Schutte-Lihotzky (July 1929). The housing associations' own magazines often carried such articles as well.

³ KHT Management Committee Minutes, 17.4.28, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17941.

⁴ *Garden Cities & Town Planning*, (1928b), 161-162.

⁵ *Garden Cities & Town Planning*, (1928c), 162.

increased considerably as it was only by alerting the public to the distress of the slum dweller that the government might be awakened to more effective action and the slums finally destroyed.

As Martin Gaskell has observed this new anti-slum crusade was the first protest campaign to make a national impact by means of mass publicity.⁶ The meetings in 1928 marked the beginnings of a drive which would unite housing reformers, the public and some architects, and contribute to the start of a significant slum clearance programme by central government. Having decided on greater collectivity of action in June 1928 members of London's voluntary housing societies began a series of initiatives to draw public attention to the slum problem, as well as facilitate cooperative action amongst societies. The commitment of the Conservatives to a slum clearance policy, and the fact that this issue formed part of the platform of all the parties in the run up to the 1929 general election meant it was important for housing societies to keep the slum problem in the public eye and through their building programmes offer both a model of housing and themselves as a potential provider of it to whichever party was elected.

A characteristic initiative was the formation of the Under Forty Club (UFC) in 1928 as youth's contribution to the housing campaign (reflecting a rather different definition of youth from today's). It was founded by Miss Faithfull, former headmistress of Cheltenham Ladies College and a number of the school's former pupils, and as such represents the continuation of the tradition of school missions begun in the late-

⁶ Gaskell (1990), 7.

nineteenth century. But in keeping with the spirit of the New Philanthropy it was less of a charity and more of an umbrella group. Its role was as '...[A] kind of...Pickfords, collecting workers and money and distributing both wherever they are most urgently needed.'⁷ The UFC wanted to raise funds for building, and to study the housing problem and provide a library of information.⁸ It also acted as a propaganda body and took full advantage of modern methods of communication to disseminate its message. In 1929 the Club persuaded the *Daily Mail* to give it a stand at that year's Ideal Home Exhibition. It displayed a large-scale model of a tenement flat.⁹ This was repeated in 1930. On both occasions the KHT contributed displays to the stand.¹⁰ In the same year the UFC produced a film 'showing the sordid and tragic home life of a slum family', this was available for loan to any organisation interested in housing.¹¹ The journal of the GCTPA records that in 1930 a display was collected and arranged for display at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine which included sections on public utility society housing, and town planning.¹²

Such work was directed at raising public awareness of the slums. The second strand of work was to encourage a continued discourse amongst housing groups after the initiatives of 1928. In October 1929 Denby and Reginald Rowe attended a conference for public utility societies, organised by the GCTPA, at the Mansion House in London.¹³ Again discussion

⁷ *Housing Happenings* (1929), 19, see also Chaplin (1931) and Pepler (1984) .

⁸ The club raised £15,000 in six years (flats cost around £500 each in 1932). Pepler (1984), 158.

⁹ Chaplin (1931), 100.

¹⁰ KHT Management Committee Minutes, 28.2.29 & 2.4.30, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17941 & 17949 respectively.

¹¹ Chaplin (1931) ,101.

¹² *Garden Cities & Town Planning*, (1930), 96.

¹³ *Garden Cities & Town Planning* (1929), 257-9.

focused on the problem of raising funds, but this time delegates were asked to consider whether they wanted to propose to the government that where local authorities were not willing to lend, then an alternative means of assistance^{must} be found. The meeting also heard B.S.Townroe speak on what he felt was significant about the sector's work. Not only did it deal with 'the class of community which most needs help' but in its approach to its tenants it was warm and humane. He remarked '...we are realising that the slum problem is not a problem of creating new buildings, but a new spirit in the tenants for improving the homes they occupy'.¹⁴ His words summarise the philosophy of the sector. At the end of the meeting it was decided to present a memorandum on the discussion to the Minister of Health.

During the following year two series of housing discussions were held.¹⁵ At these experts on a particular question opened the meeting with a short speech^{on a}, a general discussion then ensued. The topics covered were wide encompassing both the practical - reconditioning and differential rents - and the political - propaganda, how to promote better cooperation between voluntary groups and local authorities. This latter discussion perhaps reflected the desire of the sector to be given responsibility should a slum clearance policy be introduced.

This work gained new impetus with the passing of a Housing Act (the Greenwood Act) in 1930 by the recently elected Labour government. The Act was directed towards dealing with the problem of the slums highlighted by the voluntary sector. It introduced clearance areas (where

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 258.

¹⁵ England (1931), 65-68, describes these talks.

total demolition was required) and improvement areas, a subsidy per person rehoused and the discretionary power for local authorities to introduce rent rebates for tenants. Finally it seemed that the appalling problem of the slums would be tackled by a wholesale clearance programme and an entire population brought to citizenship. It was not to happen. Within a year of the Greenwood Act, Britain's economy was in a slump and the Labour government replaced by a National Government anxious to limit public expenditure. It was not until 1933 that further governmental activity renewed hopes of a full slum clearance policy. In the meantime Greenwood's vision was severely curtailed and the work of the voluntary housing sector in low-rental housing provision became even more important, and united action more of an imperative.¹⁶

If the National Government was prepared to sacrifice housing in its pursuit of economy, then the London housing societies were not prepared to accept this capitulation. The practice already gained in raising awareness of the slum problem now had to be harnessed into a more effective programme if the Government were to be persuaded to spend what money was available on housing for low rental. As Elizabeth Pepler later observed '...it was clear that only a widespread and forceful Public Opinion would speed up the dilatory legislation which was slowly beginning to emerge'.¹⁷ A new campaign was inaugurated. This time it would be more direct and shocking. The chosen method of attack was the public exhibition and so the first New Homes for Old Exhibition (NHFO) was held at Westminster Central Hall in early December 1931.

¹⁶ 12 thousand dwellings had been constructed by December 1933. Merret (1979), 50.

¹⁷ Pepler (1984), 158.

THE FIRST NEW HOMES FOR OLD EXHIBITION

Various types of public display had formed part of the unified housing campaign before the decision to hold the NHFO exhibition. Some years earlier, the KHA had used models of good and bad housing in shop windows during their election campaign of 1925. In many respects, then, the holding of a larger exhibition in a major public building was a logical extension to this pattern. The public display of information was also symptomatic of the sector's belief that if knowledge could be brought to the attention of citizens it would 'infect' them with the will to act. Although the first NHFO exhibition was held in a place to which the public would not necessarily go (this was by necessity; it was a rather hastily assembled affair), subsequent shows were held at the Building Trades Exhibitions in Olympia which attracted a large and diverse public to whom the message could be imparted.

The exact series of events which led to the decision to hold such an exhibition has not been possible to reconstruct, although there is evidence that a decision to this effect had been taken by March 1931.¹⁸ Pepler records that it was at Rachel Alexander's suggestion that a housing exhibition should be held.¹⁹ This is feasible^{for} she certainly remained a constant presence in the organisation of the first three exhibitions. Whenever the decision was taken, it had been decided by May that the exhibition would be held in conjunction with a sale of work by the UFC and that it would

¹⁸ KHA Minutes of the Executive Committee, decision reported by Rachel Alexander, 25.3.31. RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17949. I have not yet located a complete set of documents relating to the activities of the NHFO group, perhaps reflecting the fact that it was organised by different people over a number of years. References to the exhibition can be found in the minutes of the KHA & KHT, archives of the Saint Pancras Housing Association, archives of the Housing Centre Trust (HCT) and in the contemporary press.

¹⁹ Pepler (1984), 158.

take place in December;²⁰ local associations were then contacted and asked for help, financial contributions and displays.²¹ The overall responsibility for the first exhibition rested on an Executive Committee and particularly on 'the dynamic chairmanship of Elizabeth Denby and the exuberant charm of its secretary Elizabeth Alington'.²² Denby was given three months leave from the KHA between July and October 1931 and it may be that this was granted in order to allow her to prepare the exhibition.²³

In the figures of Denby and Alington are revealed the changing face of the voluntary sector by the inter-war period. It has already been noted that the transformation of the sector from a substitute for the state to an adjunct of the state, a process formalised by the emergence of the New Philanthropy, had given rise to paid workers like Denby with academic qualifications. Yet it is important to stress that although figures like her were a new feature in the voluntary sector they were by no means dominant. In fact they were often the only paid workers in voluntary groups, as was the case with Denby at the KHA. The vast majority of workers in the sector were either men like Balfour of Burleigh who gave of their time in addition to their public work, or women like Rachel Alexander with considerable private incomes who devoted their lives to unpaid work. The sector had yet to reach the state, which it would after the ^{Second World} War, when the treatment of social problems, as Harris has observed 'had become technical, specialised

²⁰ KHA Executive Committee Minutes, 27.5.31, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17949.

²¹ SPHIS Minute Book, 19.5.31, St Pancras Housing Association (SPHA) Archive.

²² Pepler (1984), 158.

²³ KHA Executive Committee Minutes, 27.5.31, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17949. Denby was given two months on half pay in addition to her month of paid holiday. Although the minutes do not record that the time was given to allow her to prepare the exhibition, it seems unlikely that she would have been given such a generous period of leave if it had not had some connection with the housing exhibition. It may be, however, that it was for other purposes since, as will be discussed later in this chapter, her absences from the KHA office would become a matter of concern for her employers.

and hived off into discrete areas of expert, professional concern'.²⁴ This process was underway, as will become clear in the discussion in subsequent chapters, but in the 1930s just as there was a mixed economy of welfare exemplified by the New Philanthropy, so too existed a mixed labour force within the sector.

So whilst Denby may be seen as a representative of the modernising face of the sector, her co-organiser Elizabeth Alington is a reminder of the continued presence of the unpaid volunteer enacting her civic duties. The Honourable Miss Alington was the daughter of the headmaster of Eton (and later the wife of Alec Douglas Home). The aristocratic connections were further reinforced by the exhibition's president, Lady Cynthia Colville and committee member Lady Pentland, the daughter of Lord and Lady Aberdeen.²⁵ Both were members of the royal circle and it was through Marjory Pentland in particular that useful royal contacts were made. The presence of titled ladies in an exhibition on slum housing may be seen as ironic however it is clear from conversations with the 'professionals' who worked on the exhibitions that they were, for the most part, seen as committed co-workers.²⁶ A contemporary described Lady Pentland as '...far more than just a titled do-gooder, bringing a mind and a personality to housing work which everyone respected'.²⁷

Together this diverse band worked on what would become the first NHFO Exhibition. Its objective was to display to the public a graphic and easily absorbed representation of the horrors of the slum conditions in which

²⁴ Harris (1989), 27.

²⁵ *Daily Telegraph* 8.10.31, cutting in RBKCCL.KHT collection.

²⁶ Pott (1995); Baker (1996); Pepler (1996a); Laycock (1997).

²⁷ Baker (1984), 160.

nearly one million of London's inhabitants dwelt.²⁸ Perhaps to act as 'curtain raisers' to the exhibition, three weeks before it opened a joint meeting on housing was held between the UFC and the London Society at the Royal Society of Arts. This period also saw the publication of a book compiled by Kathleen England of the UFC called *Housing, a Citizen's Guide to the Problem*. It features a series of articles on all aspects of the housing problem and the kinds of solutions proposed by the voluntary sector as well as describing its activities. Reginald Rowe contributed a chapter on reconditioning; Rachel Alexander wrote about the equipment of new flats; Raymond Unwin discussed 'Housing and Regional Planning'. The title of the book is significant, underlining the sector's belief that if the citizen could be placed in a position to inform her or himself, then action would surely follow. The exhibition, which followed the same line of thought, was opened on 7th December and lasted for four days, attracting around three thousand visitors in all.²⁹ Using models, photographs, posters, films and a play it showed existing conditions in order to emphasise what remained to be done.³⁰

In all, twenty two housing societies contributed to the display, each being allotted a wall space for photographs and charts. The overall design was by Mrs Darcy Braddell.³¹ The SPHIS displayed its 'Chamber of Horrors': models of the vermin and insects which infested the slums of Somers Town [4.1]. A model of the Isle of Dogs under flood conditions '...was a grimmer sight, as was the diagram from the same spot of a room in which eight people lived...'; the use of the chart with housing and overcrowding

²⁸Yeats Brown (1931), 761.

²⁹ Pepler (1984), 158.

³⁰ *The Times*, 20.11.31 - cutting in RBKCCL.KHT collection.

³¹ A J(1931), 793.

statistics would become a mainstay of all subsequent exhibitions.³² The KHT showed a model of Mary Place and next to it images of Crosfield House. The centrepiece of the exhibition was a full-size model of a typical one-room slum dwelling, nine by six feet, and its six inhabitants alongside which stood, in contrast, the living room from a brand new flat [4.2].

The displays were not left to speak for themselves. Guides and attendants, drawn from the ranks of the housing societies, were on hand to describe conditions and draw attention to distressing details. Expert guides are also recorded as taking parties around the exhibition.³³ The message was further reinforced by the showing of the films made by the various groups. The Church Army Housing Association also conveyed the message with a play written by a Miss Creagh Henry through which, according to *The Phoenix*, no-one could sit without a lump in their throat.

The Duchess of York opened this exhibition and gained the show several pages of press coverage. It is clear from the tone of these articles that the conditions the exhibition illustrated were a revelation. Hugh Redwood expressed the hope that it would lead where others might follow.³⁴ In *The Spectator* F.Yeats Brown noted that it would no longer be possible to say 'I never knew that such things existed in the twentieth century' and hoped that the exhibition would mark the beginning 'of a real national awakening as to the work which lies ahead of us'.³⁵ In the light of such coverage the exhibition was deemed a success. It certainly proved that publicity could be drawn to an unattractive subject if it was presented in an

³² *The Phoenix* (1931b), 19.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Un-sourced press cutting, 8.12.31, in RBKCCL.KHT collection.

³⁵ Yeats Brown (1931), 761.

accessible way. The use of posters and film conveyed the message quickly and easily and was commented upon by the *Architects Journal*, '...it is a bright idea to employ the art of the poster in propaganda to establish the evil of slums'.³⁶

There were two immediate outcomes of the exhibition. The first was the offer of a site at the Building Trades Exhibition at Olympia to be held in September 1932 by its organiser Mr H.G.Montgomery, thus assuring the venture a wider public in the future.³⁷ The exhibition had also proved that the London housing groups could combine to useful effect, hence it was decided to make such a combination permanent. In December 1931 formal negotiations began when a series of proposals on what form a central organisation might take were read. Three are recorded, one by Denby, one by C.M.Wynne,³⁸ the other has not survived and its author is unknown.³⁹ Wynne's paper proposed a central housing conference, and a central housing society. Denby's was much more detailed and gives a good idea of the philosophy of housing she would increasingly develop from this time onwards.

She opened her discussion by noting that with few exceptions most of London's twenty two housing societies were finding it almost impossible to raise money at low rates of interest, a problem compounded by the high

³⁶ *AJ* (1931), 793.

³⁷ Pentland (1932), 7.

³⁸ Wynne was a civil servant, member of the management committee of Fulham House Improvement Society and had initiated the Housing Discussions programme of 1930-31. Source, evidence supplied to Departmental Committee on Housing (Moyné Committee), March 1933, PRO, HLG 49/7.

³⁹ HCT Archive, file C/5, 'Notes on a Central Organisation for Voluntary Housing' - Denby's and Wynne's papers are here, there is also a copy of Denby's paper, entitled 'A Proposal for a Central Organisation of London Housing Societies', amongst her papers at the BRE.

cost of building because of the small scale on which they built. This meant that such groups were unlikely to effect much change alone 'though they each possess a fund of local knowledge and practical experience which should not be allowed to perish'. Nor did local authorities seem likely to do much; yet a certain point of momentum had been reached. Public opinion was roused and public authorities were impressed by voluntary efforts '[t]he Societies must not throw away the opportunity they have helped to create'. The solution was to work 'on a large and centralised scale'. This would require first, the formation of a small board of first-rate directors who would deal with all financial matters, raising funds by loans or by attracting capital. This body would work in close cooperation with the government and public authorities 'being recognised as a competent authority for purposes of subsidy, acquisition of properties etc'. Both reconditioning and new building would be undertaken. The Board would, in consultation with 'the Town and Planning Association' [sic] and the government work on the basis of a plan of rebuilding and reconditioning for the whole of London.

Second, for the actual building, she recommended the development of two or three plans 'embodying the most labour-saving and economical designs'. Fittings should be standardised whilst 'freshness and variety in elevation would be obtained by individual architects' designs'. Material would be bulk-bought and distributed locally. The new dwellings would be managed by local offices of women estate managers. Finally, in addition to the finance board, 'headquarters' would also need a small central executive committee which would work at specific problems through ad-hoc committees^{and} specialists could be co-opted to assist these enquiries. Its remit

could encompass the preparation of standard plans; co-ordination of all the different interests concerned in planning an estate; keeping the NHFO exhibition up to date; the development of a library; initiation of open-air nursery schools, health centres, lectures to or classes for tenants.

The model of housing she offered reflects the range of approaches she had seen, and been part of, in Kensington. In its emphasis on the need for local knowledge and practice co-ordinated at a national level she adheres to the New Philanthropy's desire to retain face-to-face contact yet in an efficient and rationalised manner. Her vision of the inclusion of health centres and nursery schools again places her firmly within an approach to housing which did not deal solely with building, but with the person who lived in the dwelling once it was built or reconditioned. This is a remarkable document and evidence of the beginning of Denby's next career development. The presentation of the paper can be seen as part of the process by which she began to wean herself away from the KHA and start to piece together the contacts and situations which would allow her to become a housing consultant.

This first meeting was followed by a series which took place over the next year. These dealt with both the formation of a central London housing group and the NHFO exhibition. The first for which records survive took place in February 1932.⁴⁰ At this nominations were requested for the membership of a general committee, for which the KHA proposed Denby, Rachel Alexander and Lady Maurice.⁴¹ By July 1932 this had become a formal committee whose members included Anne Lupton (of the Fulham

⁴⁰ SPHIS Minutes, 26.1.32, SPHA Archive.

⁴¹ KHA Executive Committee Minutes, 12.2.32, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17949.

Housing Association), Denby, Lady Pentland, Rachel Alexander, Mr Wynne, Mr Holland Martin and Miss Alington. Its chair was the architect T. Alwyn Lloyd.⁴² The minutes show that by this date an organising committee had been formed to run the next NHFO show with Denby as its chair. Also at this meeting a resolution was formally passed on the proposal for greater cross-London links. 'This meeting...is strongly in favour of proceeding as quickly as possible in forming a central housing society...'. A small committee was then appointed of Anne Lupton and Alwyn Lloyd, who were given co-opting powers. They invited the UFC to join their work, the three groups being based in offices given by the Duke of Westminster.

During 1932, these groups produced a preliminary outline of policy which stated that the London Housing Societies were investigating two main plans of action: the formation of a central housing association 'where knowledge and experience would be pooled' and a central housing society to deal with new building and reconditioning on a large scale.⁴³ Two years later these proposals were finally brought to fruition. In 1934 the Housing Centre was established as a central propaganda and information body. This incorporated the UFC and the NHFO group as well as having close contacts with the GCTPA. The first chairman of the Centre was Reginald Rowe (who was replaced the following year by Patrick Abercrombie), his vice-chairs were Balfour of Burleigh, Rachel Alexander and Lady Pentland. The centre's council included Marjory Allen, Gerald Barry, Raymond Unwin and Francis Yerbury.⁴⁴ In his speech at the opening of

⁴² HCT Archive, file C/5, 'meeting of representatives of London Housing Societies', 18.7.32 held at Aubrey House (Alexander's home).

⁴³ *Ibid*, Preliminary Outline, probably 1932.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, miscellaneous papers relating to Housing Centre.

the Centre Rowe stated 'We want to make the Housing Centre something like the heart and brain of housing in this country. There is nothing that will make for the better housing of the poor that we are not prepared to study and work at...'.⁴⁵ The following year the National Federation of Housing Societies was formed with responsibility for the construction side of the sector's work. The Housing Centre became the main arena for housing reform debate from the mid-1930s onwards and was responsible for the organisation of the NHFO exhibitions from 1934.⁴⁶

NEW HOMES FOR OLD, SEPTEMBER 1932

Whilst negotiations for a central organisation continued, the momentum and attention gained by the first NHFO exhibition could not be allowed to dissipate. The show had been designed to be portable and throughout the Spring and Summer of 1932 it was shown around the country, usually at the request of provincial housing groups. In the meantime in London a new exhibition committee was formed to work on the display for the Building Trades Exhibition in September. This time the organisation was under the sole chairmanship of Elizabeth Denby.

Despite being the exhibition's organiser, Denby does not seem to have been given any leave by the KHA to work on its preparation. She wrote later that she worked on it 'in what I called my spare time'.⁴⁷ To assist her she assembled a team of women all of whom were experts in their

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, copy of speech by Reginald Rowe at opening of Housing Centre.

⁴⁶ Although Denby had been involved in the early stages which led to the Centre's creation, once it was formed she seems to have had few formal connections with it. She did, however, on occasion, serve on some of its committees. There are documents which show her attendance at a meeting on research with Patrick Abercrombie, Eugen Kaufmann, Max Fry and Lady Pentland in December 1936. HCT Archive, file C/5.

⁴⁷ DP 'Apprenticeship'.

particular fields. From the voluntary sector she drew workers to curate the sections on slums, reconditioning, new building, and to deal with the catalogue and publicity. For the sections on town planning, the model flat and for technical advice and assistance she chose architects and town planners. This is significant for it represents, in microcosm, the collaborative approach which Denby would later try to practise. To make the exhibition an effective piece of propaganda she drew together those who were best qualified to convey the attack against the slums. By extension in real life, those with expert knowledge of slums and their occupants should collaborate with designers and planners to create the optimum solution.

Denby's approach was to make of the second NHFO exhibition a much more organised and hard-hitting representation of the facts. Her intention was to 'reveal to those who visited it not only the essential nature of the need for improvement if any social progress is to be made; but the many valuable ways in which the needed improvement can take place'.⁴⁸ This addition may be attributed to the fact that in the months following the exhibition a new housing bill, later the 1933 Housing Act, would be going through parliament. In conveying the message of the suitability of the voluntary housing sector as a supplier of social housing, the organising committee benefited from a grant from the Carnegie Trustees, which enabled them to produce better visual displays.⁴⁹ So much so that *The Spectator* observed that it was 'the most impressive, the best arranged and the most comprehensive housing exhibition yet seen in this country'.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ NHFO (1932), 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵⁰ Townroe (1932), 384.

The exhibition opened at Olympia on September 14th 1932 and lasted for two weeks. Denby described it as creating a furore.⁵¹ The visitor followed a sequence which began with 'slums' and culminated in a model flat. Like the first exhibition the display included models, photographs and statistical charts, using the data from the recently completed 1931 census, to underpin the message about the cost of the slums. A catalogue, produced by Lady Pentland, also provided a longer lasting reminder of the problem.

The first bay examined slum conditions and was curated by Avice Trench, a member of the Manchester & Salford Better Housing Council, presumably known to Denby through the public utility society conferences of the GCTPA. Once again the SPHIS' Chamber of Horrors was on display; its horrors further enhanced by a scale model of a one-room home in London occupied by a family of six. A second section of this display featured charts and photographs which showed the correlation between bad housing and bad health in several of Britain's major cities. From here the visitor moved into the first section to proffer a solution, 'Reconditioning', curated by Kathleen England of the UFC. The display here was mostly of photographs of work carried out and once again statistical charts. This section also included illustrations of the work of Octavia Hill-trained housing managers in order to remind visitors that 'well-qualified and trained management is a vital factor in the success of any reconditioning or new building scheme'.⁵²

⁵¹ DP, 'Apprenticeship'.

⁵² NHFO (1932), 11.

The next section on Town Planning was the work of Jocelyn Abram. The first woman member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, she worked for the planning practice of W.R.Davidge and had strong connections with the Fulham Housing Association and Housing Centre.⁵³ It is not clear how she came to be involved with the exhibition but women who worked with Denby at this time recalled that she was keen to support other professional women and it may be that it was for this reason that Abram came to work on NHFO.⁵⁴ Her exhibit stressed the need for the public to press for the practice of town planning, especially in the wake of the passage of the Town and Country Planning Act in the summer of 1932. Hence the display was essentially educative, outlining the main objects of planning; modern town improvements; a history of town planning and examples of the work of contemporary planning schemes. The message was that the public should require that 'the fuller planning powers [now] made available are used to preserve the manifold beauty of the countryside and to increase the amenities and conveniences of the town'.⁵⁵

Having passed through an information and literature stand, the visitor reached the climax of the exhibition: new building and the model flat. The former was curated by Denby and Rachel Alexander. It offered a survey and commentary on the type of work being carried out both by local authorities and voluntary groups; a map of London being used here to show densities of population and housing provided in each area. The first section showed examples of cottage estates, the most common type of

⁵³ Jocelyn Abram later changed her surname to Adburgham. Information on her in Ledeboer (1979) and RIBA BAL biography file.

⁵⁴ Pott (1995), Baker (1996).

⁵⁵ NHFO (1932), 11.

development outside London. Denby noted in the catalogue that the self-contained cottages with gardens built on such estates 'are undoubtedly most congenial to British taste'; a fact she later bore in mind when she produced designs for rehousing slum dwellers in 1936.⁵⁶ Complementing this display was a series of charts which showed the figures for unemployment in the building trade and the variations in the cost of money since 1928.

Flats were also considered, since this would be the most common form of rehousing in areas, like London, where the high cost of land made this unavoidable. Reflecting the sentiments of the voluntary sector Denby and Alexander stressed that if such flats were to succeed then care had to be taken in their design and management. 'It is...vital that the pre-war barrack tradition should be discarded, and that flats should be planned as centres of happy, family life'.⁵⁷ Photographs were shown of the amenities which would facilitate this model of existence: verandahs, playgrounds, gardens, community halls. They also emphasised the importance of economy of design and low running costs and showed examples of the use of space in flats in Germany, Austria and Sweden. Cooking and heating, and furniture, especially built-in, were also considered.

The last section of the display featured a model flat 'to show the use that can be made at a reasonable cost of the 760 square feet which is the area recommended by the Ministry of Health for a three-bedroomed non-parlour dwelling'.⁵⁸ According to the flat's co-architect Janet Pott (then

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 14, see ch.8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

Fletcher) the idea for it was Denby's.⁵⁹ Pott had trained at the Architectural Association and lived in Campden Hill, Kensington where she had become aware of the work of the KHT and decided to join. As a result she came to know Denby who then invited her to contribute to the first NHFO exhibition, she made the model of Mary Place. Pott worked on the flat with her partner Alison Shepherdⁿ to produce what Denby described as 'what seemed to be an eye-opening revelation to the thousands of people who came to look...the enchanting, gay, airy, charmingly proportioned colourful three-bedroomed flat.'⁶⁰ The flat was intended for a family of seven [4.3]. Its three bedrooms provided separate rooms for boys, girls and parents with infants. Most space was given to a large living room with dining recess; the kitchen was well-equipped and designed to a labour saving layout. It also featured built-in and specially-designed furniture, all within a budget of thirty pounds, intended as models for what tenants could make themselves [4.4].

This first collaboration between volunteers and 'professionals' produced a remarkable exhibition, one which clearly pitted the progressive approach of the voluntary sector towards housing design and policy against that of successive central governments which, generated by men, built council estates with few, if any, amenities alongside the houses or flats. The exhibition also reiterated the sector's criticism of the continued inactivity of local and national government. Charts were displayed showing how different local boroughs spent their rates on housing, or did not.⁶¹ As

⁵⁹ Pott (1995).

⁶⁰ DP 'Apprenticeship'.

⁶¹ *Town & Country Planning*, (1932), 19 gives the statistics. Paddington with a penny rate which raised £7505 had built nothing, Woolwich with a rate producing £4,264 had built 2586 dwellings.

visitors left the exhibition a panel reminded them: 'a million new houses are needed to-day to relieve overcrowding, sweep away the slums, give work to the unemployed'.⁶²

The greater sophistication of the 1932 show, and its location within a major public exhibition was a further step forward in the anti-slum campaign. It was reported to have attracted 20 thousand visitors and attracted more press than the first exhibition had, in particular from the architectural press which reflected the value of its new location.⁶³ The reception it received is summarised by the comment of the *Architect and Building News*: '...taken as a whole, the exhibit is stimulating and provocative, and should have a useful influence'.⁶⁴

The extent to which these two exhibitions were a cause or a symptom of a growth in awareness about the slums and whether they were a stimulus to action is almost impossible to establish, although Elizabeth Macadam noted in her book *The New Philanthropy* that 'a travelling exhibition of models, photographs, and graphic statements and a film did much to educate the public'.⁶⁵ Certainly, by 1933 the amount of attention paid to the slum problem was far greater than when the NHFO group first began its work. Ernest Simon commented on a new consciousness amongst the public and of how '...in 1933, we are...in the midst of the biggest wave of public opinion since 1920'.⁶⁶ During the rest of the 1930s a stream of books on the slums were published, some documentary, some rather more

⁶² Pentland (1932), 11.

⁶³ KHA *Annual Report*, 1932, RBKCCL.KHT collection.

⁶⁴ *Architect & Building News* (1932), 397.

⁶⁵ Macadam (1934), 147.

⁶⁶ Simon (1933), 4.

sensationalist.⁶⁷ In addition to books and newspaper articles, a new means of (mass) communication, the wireless talk, was used to keep the problem in the public eye. Between January and March 1933 listeners to the BBC heard Howard Marshall's series 'Other People's Homes' in which he visited slum areas across Britain and gave first-hand descriptions of what he saw, generating a great deal of comment.⁶⁸

Amongst these talks was one by Raymond Unwin which outlined his scheme for a National Housing Board.⁶⁹ This proposal, which was highly resonant of Denby's paper of December 1931, was for a national public utility society board which would be able to raise capital at a low rate of interest;⁷⁰ act as an alternative body through which local authorities could provide new housing, and combine with social welfare organisations more easily than local government. He argued that this plan offered 'the best prospect of securing a decent dwelling for every family in the country'.⁷⁰ This programme was broadcast at the same time as a smaller version of the NHFO exhibition was put on display at 24 Grosvenor Place under the title 'Housing, the Present Opportunity'.⁷¹

Unwin's broadcast and the holding of this exhibition should be seen within the context of further significant changes in central government

⁶⁷ See for example, Quigley & Goldie (1934) and Mrs Cecil Chesterton's 'I Lived in a Slum!' of 1936.

⁶⁸ *The Listener* published transcripts of all 12 talks, see *The Listener* (1933a) and relevant letters pages.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, programme 9, 29.3.35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 474. This proposal was eventually published, see National Housing Committee (1934). The Committee's members included Unwin, Balfour of Burleigh, Alfred Bossom, and Seebohm Rowntree.

⁷¹ NHFO (1933). Denby again participated in this exhibition, curating new building with Judith Ledeboer. The foreword to the catalogue was by J.B. Priestley, whose wife served on the committee of the SPHIS, the introduction was by Raymond Unwin.

housing policy. In March 1933 the Minister of Health declared 'a mass attack on the slums' with the passing of a Housing Act which abolished subsidies for all but slum clearance schemes and ordered all local authorities to produce five year clearance programmes. As Patricia Garside has noted this legislation indicated that the role of voluntary housing associations would henceforth be limited to a supplement to local authority activity.⁷² The sector now had to work even harder to promote itself as a potential provider. Initially it seemed that a possible lifeline was offered by the establishment in March of a departmental committee (the Moyne Committee) by the Minister to investigate the possibility of the state working in some way with voluntary housing groups to provide housing.⁷³ The resulting *Report*, issued in July, was a disappointment. It recommended only that public utility societies might play a role in reconditioning work but not serve as a major provider. The *Report* was never implemented, but it was apparent that the voluntary housing sector would no longer enjoy the role it had in the 1920s and that it would now be forced to work in tandem with local authorities when they so chose, or to take on a different role; a process reflected in the formation of the Housing Centre as a think tank organisation. It was as such shifts were underway that Denby began to rethink her position within the KHA and instigated the next phase of her reinvention.

⁷² Garside (1994).

⁷³ GB Ministry of Health (1933), usually known as the Moyne Report. Denby was amongst those called to give evidence about the work of housing associations to the committee. She attended with Balfour of Burleigh and Miss Blythe, the KHT's housing manager. Most uncharacteristically she said nothing during the interview. PRO, HLG 52/792.

TOWARDS HOUSING CONSULTANCY

When she looked back at this period Denby wrote 'My ardour and my satisfaction in the effort we were making by 1932 were growing rather thin'. As she surveyed the 1932 exhibition she recalled how she realised 'that I was intensely bored with the slums; they no longer had any interest or meaning for me...My life, my interest, enjoyment and heart, lay with what was to take their place - with new building, with construction and everything that meant'.⁷⁴ The focus of her work now became how to involve herself in this kind of activity by using the experience she had gained at the KHA and KHT. She had a huge knowledge about slums, slum dwellers and housing legislation, excellent propaganda skills, as well as the social-science methodologies she had learnt at the LSE. The state was now assuming responsibility for slum clearance at the expense of the voluntary sector; perhaps she could making a place for herself in this work? Her knowledge could be used to inform its clearance programme, she could work as a consultant, an expert on the needs of the slum dwellers. During 1933 she lay the foundations for this role.

In many respects Denby had already initiated the process of separation from the KHT by her work in the NHFO groups and the moves towards the foundation of the Housing Centre. In the early months of 1933 she built on this groundwork and started to move into a more public role. She did this, firstly, through writing and broadcasting. In this work there are already indications of the ideas which would inform her practice as a housing consultant.

⁷⁴ DP 'Apprenticeship'.

Her first surviving 'published' piece of work, apart from her contributions to various NHFO catalogues, is a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* printed on March 1st 1933.⁷⁵ Entitled 'Should Houses cost less? Builders to find a way', she questioned why the building trade had failed to develop strategies to reduce building costs unlike other industries which, through advances in technique and a disregard for traditions, had managed to provide better quality goods at lower prices. Could they not now do the same? The interest, shown here, in using progress in technology to bring quality to a mass market, a sort of democracy of design, was something which would inform much of her work in the 1930s.

Her entry into journalism proper came in March 1933 when she contributed an article "Overcrowded Kensington, In the Royal Borough" to the *Architectural Review*.⁷⁶ There is no evidence to explain how she was awarded this commission, however since the article formed part of a special issue on the need for a planning body for London and featured the Plan for North Kensington prepared by the RIBA committee, it may have been that it was this that led to her article. Much of the text echoes the themes already promulgated by the propaganda work of the KHA (suggesting her authorship of such writings). Denby contrasts comfortable south with squalid north Kensington, and reiterates the fact that decent families were forced to live in appalling conditions if they were to be near their workplace. The solution, she suggests, lays in planning, '...by which industry would be zoned and no longer allowed to spring up among dwelling places, blocking out light and air; by which the inhabitants would be rescued from the dismal treeless streets of the speculative builder; by

⁷⁵ Denby (1933a). All references to Denby's writing can be found in Appendix A.

⁷⁶ Denby (1933b).

which proper provision would be made for schools, playgrounds, allotments'; all themes she would repeat in her later work and writing.⁷⁷ In this context it is her closing paragraph where she acknowledges the model of 18th and early 19th century planning techniques that is the most interesting aspect of this article. The high density urban 'planning' techniques of the developers of north Kensington would prove a lasting influence on Denby when she worked alone on the design of new accommodation for slum dwellers (see chapter eight).

Two months later her theme had changed again and her medium. In May she broadcast on the BBC on 'Design in the Kitchen',⁷⁸ a subject she pursued again in July writing 'Women and Kitchens' for *Design for Today*; a similar article appeared in the *Architectural Review* called 'In the Kitchen'.⁷⁹ Again there is no evidence to explain how Denby came to be asked to participate in the programme, although the article in *Design for Today* was probably due to Maxwell Fry whom she had met by this date and who was its editor.⁸⁰ The design of kitchens had become a major area of discussion since the war years, exacerbated in the 1920s by the perceived 'servant problem' and was an issue about which women in particular wrote.⁸¹ The KHT had been interested in using labour-saving kitchens in their blocks of flats so Denby would have been familiar with debates about kitchen design from her work there; additionally she would have accrued

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 116.

⁷⁸ See Denby (1934a). The series comprised eleven broadcasts in all, these were published in *The Listener*. For Denby's broadcast see *The Listener* (1933b). These talks were then written up into a book published in 1934 and edited by John Gloag. See Gloag (1934/46). A discussion booklet was also issued to accompany the broadcasts, see BBC (1933).

⁷⁹ Denby (1933c/e).

⁸⁰ Denby's meeting with Fry will be discussed later in this chapter.

⁸¹ See, for example, Braddell (1934); I will discuss this literature more fully in part two.

a large knowledge from her research for the NHFO exhibitions which included sections on kitchen design. There is, however, no evidence to suggest why she should have been sufficiently well-known to have been invited to broadcast on the matter, for no writings by her on the subject survive from before this date. Again, it is conceivable that it may have been through Fry. He and his close friend Wells Coates both contributed talks to this series so he may have suggested her to the programme's editors.

The broadcast and the subsequent articles differ little in content. What is striking about them, and perhaps not surprising in view of the likely audience, is that in them Denby deals primarily with the design of kitchens for the middle classes. She mentions that the designer should consider whether the kitchen will be used as a maid's sitting room or just as a workshop, and discusses how the housewife might deal with tradesmen. This aside, the articles clearly reveal her familiarity with debates about kitchens at this date. 'The idea now is to produce a kitchen in which the work can be done as quickly and as well as possible'.⁸² Further on, she repeats the theme of her letter to the *Daily Telegraph* 'If only designers could produce the perfect cooker within reach of all our pockets...'.⁸³ The majority of these articles was devoted to more practical discussion in which she emphasised the need to organise the kitchen around the way it is actually used; the desirability of surfaces which are easy to clean, and for a room which was as light as possible. The illustrations used for these articles reveal her wide range of reference,

⁸² *The Listener* (1933b) 782.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

showing designs from Munich,⁸⁴ Stuttgart, Sweden and by designers such as Raymond McGrath, Wells Coates⁸⁵ and Mrs Darcy (Dorothy) Braddell.⁸⁶ Again, these principles would inform her later work, applying the ideas expressed about middle-class kitchens to those for the working classes.

By October 1933 her subject had changed again. In this month her review of the Moyne Report was published in the *Social Services Review* (the journal of the NCSS). In what was a detailed analysis of the *Report* her adherence to the tenets of the New Philanthropy is clear as well as her ability to scrutinise government policy on the basis of a thorough knowledge of housing legislation. On the whole, she welcomed the publication of the *Report* and the promise it held for greater support for the work of public utility societies, writing 'There is no doubt that an extension of the work of Public Utility Societies, and the direct stimulation thereby of public responsibility for the good condition of low-rented property will not only quicken civic pride but relieve the pressure of work on Local Authorities and reduce the expenses of inspection which fall on the rate payer'.⁸⁷ She also noted that the extension of employment for women housing managers could have nothing but positive results. In her discussion of the minutiae of the *Report* she is more critical, noting the potential overlap between its proposals for reconditioning of slum and overcrowded housing and the existing legislation under the 1930 Act. She further noted that if the *Report* became an Act of Parliament, it would set up a parallel system of subsidies to those of the 1930 Act, a problem which would be exacerbated by the fact that the Moyne subsidies were higher

⁸⁴ BBC (1933), xi.

⁸⁵ Denby (1934a), plates 16-23.

⁸⁶ Denby (1933c), 113.

⁸⁷ Denby (1933d), 170.

than those of the Greenwood Act. Since the Moyne Report was never to form the basis of legislation her argument was ultimately moot, however the article clearly demonstrates her firm grasp of the complexity of housing legislation and her ability to argue a case.

This small range of articles seems, on the surface, diverse. Whilst this can be explained as reflecting the kind of offers a jobbing writer might accept, in Denby's case another explanation is viable. The diversity had a purpose. It demonstrated her breadth of knowledge and what she saw as the types of information necessary if the slum problem were to be successfully resolved. An understanding of subsidy was of equal importance to the ability to design a labour-saving kitchen. These were all part of a solution. The diversity of her expertise demonstrated in these articles was both a model of practice, a way to introduce herself to the public realm and a means to secure employment by a variety of bodies. Writing was one way to achieve this goal but whilst it provided a reasonably steady supply of work, it was hardly sufficient to justify giving up her job at the KHT especially as she seems to have had no income other than that which she could earn herself. Before she could resign she needed to be sure she had secured for herself a reasonable income. Two further opportunities in 1933, one self-made, the other exploited, gave her this security.

Denby noted in her autobiography that from 1932 onwards her interest lay in what would replace the slums. She wanted to influence the form rehousing might take. In order to do so she needed to put herself in a position to demonstrate her ability to do this. Her journalism was one method, but her position of authority would be enhanced if she could

make a more definitive statement about housing. It was, perhaps, for this reason that she decided to apply for a research grant to allow her to visit rehousing schemes across Europe in order to assess how the ideas developed there might be applied to British circumstances. At some date after July 1933 she applied to the Leverhulme Trust for funds,⁸⁸ probably because, as Elizabeth Macadam observed, its policy was to give money to 'experienced workers "prevented from carrying out research either by pressure of routine duties or by any other cause"'.⁸⁹ Five years later this would become her book *Europe Rehoused*.

At the same time as Denby was applying to the Trust she became involved in the series of events which would allow her to sever her links with north Kensington and launch herself once and for all as a housing consultant. In the minutes of the Management Committee of the KHT for 24th July 1933, the reading of a letter by Lord Balfour of Burleigh to Lady Maurice was recorded: 'At the present time some of us feel that Miss Denby is away a good deal from the office and does a lot of work of which we know nothing, which may or may not have to do with housing, but which is apparently not directly connected with Kensington Housing Trust'.⁹⁰ This letter formed part of a discussion about Denby's salary and behaviour which culminated in her resignation three months later. Reference has already been made to the boredom Denby felt with her work following the NHFO exhibition in September 1932. Her actions in the

⁸⁸ The Leverhulme Trust have a limited archive for this period and were unwilling to allow access. My information is thus derived from correspondence with the Trust's secretary. Denby's original application has, apparently, not survived.

⁸⁹ Macadam (1934), 260. Interestingly, in a footnote to this page she notes that 'Another successful candidate is the secretary of a voluntary housing association, and selected housing reform as the object of her research'.

⁹⁰ KHT Management Committee Minutes, 24.7.33, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17942.

subsequent year certainly suggest someone who had reached an impasse and was desperate to find a way out, even if this entailed actions which could be interpreted as less than honest.

Clearly, Denby's entry into journalism and broadcasting occupied some of her time during these absences from the KHT office but in the light of such evidence as survives, much of which is difficult to date precisely, it seems that it was in the early months of 1933 that she made the high-profile and useful contacts which would provide her with the work necessary to leave the KHT behind her. The first of these was with the Prince of Wales who through his position as patron of the NCSS had become a vocal supporter of voluntary social service. In the early 1930s his visits to the depressed areas had led him to an interest in housing and it was as a result of his desire to find a solution to the slum problem that he came to know Denby.⁹¹

In 1936, Denby was featured in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* which discussed her work as a housing consultant. In it she is described as one of 'a small band of people who included the present King...who got to grips with the human as well as the bricks and mortar problems of slums, rehousing and of homes'.⁹² The article records that 'just after 1932' the Prince went 'unadvertised' on foot with Denby around slum areas 'learning the hard facts of housing and humanity'. It is not surprising that Denby should have come to know the future king. Kensington was close at hand to the homes of royalty and the KHT's work well known to

⁹¹ For a description of the Prince's involvement with the voluntary social service movement see Windsor (1933) and Ziegler (1990), 182-218.

⁹² Woollcombe (1936), 6.

members of the royal family such as the Duchess of York and Princess Alice. A further connection between Denby and the Prince of Wales was Lady Pentland who had known him since he was a child. Whatever the exact circumstances of the meeting between Denby and the Prince of Wales, its significance lies in the fact that it gave Denby an early indication that there was a demand for an adviser on housing issues. Contact with the prince also introduced her to his circle of friends and through them commissions, certainly from his then mistress Freda Dudley Ward and possibly from Mrs Mozelle Sassoon.

Mozelle Sassoon was the extremely wealthy widow of Meyer Elias Sassoon who had run the merchant and banking company E.D.Sassoon.⁹³ From her house in Hamilton Place, Mayfair she lived two lives, as a wealthy society hostess and as a benefactor of charities. Her main interest was in medical charity but in the early 1930s, perhaps through her acquaintance with the Prince of Wales who was a close friend of her cousin Phillip Sassoon, she gave money to charities for the unemployed and became interested in social housing. She was also involved in the Pioneer Health Centre and it may also have been through this connection that she came to know Denby who had an interest in the Centre's work.

It was Denby's association with Mrs Sassoon which would cause the break with Kensington. In June 1933, Denby reported to the Management Committee of the KHT that Sassoon had offered the Trust between five and seven thousand pounds to build a block of dwellings provided she could be given a site free.⁹⁴ The flats were to be a memorial to her son

⁹³ On Mozelle Sassoon see Jackson (1968) and Roth (1941).

⁹⁴ KHT Management Committee Minutes, 14.6.33. RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17942.

Reginald who had died the previous January in a steeplechasing accident. Denby also reported that she had arranged for Mrs Sassoon to meet Reginald Rowe and the Medical Officer of Health so that she could have a choice of sites if the KHT were unable to provide one. In response, the Committee agreed to purchase a site and put it at Mrs Sassoon's disposal.

At this point, everything seemed entirely normal. A considerable benefaction had been offered to the Trust which it was happy to accept. By the following month things had become more complicated. At the same meeting at which Balfour had read the letter complaining of Denby's absences from the office and at which her salary had been debated a further issue was discussed. It was clear that the Trust was unhappy about the Sassoon offer and, in particular, Denby's role in the matter. She was asked to write a letter to the Committee which gave 'a satisfactory assurance that she regards her job as an entirely whole time one, and realises that, except with the permission of the Committee her job is not Housing in general but Kensington Housing Trust and Kensington Housing Association [and secondly] naming the other things that she does and asking the Committee's permission to continue doing them'. Balfour then added a third condition '[she must add] a satisfactory assurance to cover the case of Mrs Sassoon, ie. that she realises that it is not within her province to "divert" subscribers' funds away from Kensington Housing Trust, whatever her personal feelings may be about the way they are to be used'.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ KHT Management Committee Minutes, 24.7.33, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17942

This comment may refer to another item on the agenda which referred to the receipt of written confirmation from Mrs Sassoon of her offer of what she described as 'modern low-rented dwellings'. Her letter also added that she had seen and liked plans prepared by Maxwell Fry. Although the meeting agreed to ask Fry to draw up more detailed plans once a site was found it seems likely that they disliked such decisive action by a donor and held Denby responsible since she was the conduit through which the benefaction had come.⁹⁶ The Committee agreed that it was undesirable for the Secretary to be engaged in any scheme outside the KHT with similar objects 'whether the money for such a scheme were provided by personal friends of the Secretary or otherwise'.⁹⁷ In response, Denby disagreed with the second condition she was asked to include in her letter, and argued that the issue of subscribers' funds was based on a misapprehension. She did consent, however, to the proposed scope of her duties, perhaps because the Committee had agreed to increase her salary to 350 pounds per annum.

This was a short-lived peace and it is clear that, whatever the exact circumstances of the dispute between Denby and the KHT, she had used the offer of funds from Mrs Sassoon to test how much of an influence she might have over building policy, particularly as regards the choice of architect. The exact date of Denby's first meeting with Fry is not clear though it was obviously sufficiently before the 24th July to allow him to produce plans for a block of flats. The only witness to this meeting is Fry himself, a rather unreliable commentator whose account may be informed as much by his desire to place himself at the centre of Britain's avant-garde

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

community as by a desire to accurately record a meeting which would give a great boost to a rather moribund career.

It is, however, the only account and if it is true extremely revealing of Denby's progress in London's intelligentsia. In his autobiography Fry describes how he was at a party at studio in Hampstead, either Ben Nicholson's or Henry Moore's, sitting in a window seat next to 'a small dynamic woman with a lovely rich voice'.⁹⁸ This was Denby. The conversation concerned Fry's ideas for the design of blocks of low-cost flats which were based on the use of a portal truss in reinforced concrete. Within a week, he recalled, 'My woman of the window seat...came to me...to say that Lady [sic] Sassoon would put up the money for my flats to be the first of a girdle of dwellings round the Peckham Health Centre...And so I was launched'.⁹⁹ Since the site at Peckham would not be offered until October of 1933 this latter part of his account is clearly confused, however it does suggest that Denby was, at the very least, prepared to try and manipulate the Trust into using a particular architect, one who, in return for getting him the job, would give her a collaborative role. Whether Mrs Sassoon's offer was already available or Denby solicited it from her having met Fry is not clear but the discussions at the meeting on the 24th July imply that Denby's actions were sufficiently opaque to suggest that the offer had first been made to the Trust and that she was now trying to divert it so that the flats could be built to her vision.

However inaccurate Fry's recall might have been, it is of great interest that he should have met Denby at an artist's studio in Hampstead. How she

⁹⁸ Fry (1975), 138.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

came to be in such a place in the summer of 1933 is a matter for conjecture.¹⁰⁰ It seems feasible that her friendship with the Allens may have placed her in the sort of social circles which were based in Hampstead. ~~Marjory Allen had been friends with Ben Nicholson's first wife, Winifred Knight, which may be another possible connection.~~ What is significant about this location is that it places Denby at the heart of Britain's inter-war intelligentsia and another set of potential contacts.¹⁰¹

What happened after the bad-tempered meeting in July is not clear. A rather strained atmosphere in the KHT office can be imagined and the refusal of the Management Committee to accede autonomy to Denby over the Sassoon offer must have indicated to her that her work for the Trust would not expand in the way she wanted. At this date, apart from her journalism, she had few concrete offers of work outside the Trust. Her application to the Leverhulme Trust would have been sent after this meeting, but the reply would not come for another two months. She had few offers of writing, except the transcription of her talk for the BBC.

On the 19th September she wrote a letter to the Management Committee, presumably in response to the request made on the 24th July.¹⁰² The Committee's response ~~created an impasse~~ since it felt 'it was unable to accede to the views and statement of fact contained therein'. She resigned, officially, on 2nd October 1933. This was accepted by the Committee who in so doing wished 'to express their sincere appreciation of the work done by

¹⁰⁰ Allan (1969), 72, quotes Fry as dating the meeting to the summer.

¹⁰¹ See Collins (1975) for a fuller discussion of Hampstead's population of intellectuals in the 1930s.

¹⁰² These events are recorded in Management Committee minutes for 2.10.33. RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17942.

her ever since the formation of the KHT and to place on record their view that Miss Denby's work has largely contributed to the success achieved by the Trust'. At the same meeting Mrs Sassoon's offer was formally turned down.

Denby's work with the KHA/T was over. However murky the circumstances of her departure may have been she was clearly held in high esteem;¹⁰³ her testimonial raised just over 23 pounds, a not inconsiderable sum, which was used to give her a cheque for 20 pounds and buy a cigarette case.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps Denby had no option but to resign. It may be that she already knew that an alternative site could be found for Mrs Sassoon's flats. Perhaps the resignation was a huge gamble which paid off. It may be that her encounter with Max Fry in the summer of 1933 gave her the psychological impetus to be able to break with the voluntary sector. It was a timely meeting, coinciding with her growing interest in the issue of design and the opportunity to exercise it from Mozelle Sassoon. In modernism Fry offered Denby a means to fulfil her desire to deal with the 'constructive' side of the slum problem. As he later recalled, '...the new architecture...was the means by which we could satisfy her urgent need to serve the London poor'.¹⁰⁵ Her subsequent alliance with Fry and his contemporaries in the emerging British modern movement suggests that, at least in the early years of her consultancy, she saw modernism as the way forward, architecturally and professionally, in rehousing work. Fry's description of their collaboration also evokes someone who was

¹⁰³ In a letter written shortly before her death Denby insisted that she did not leave the Trust under a cloud but because she was awarded the Leverhulme grant. The chronology does not support this explanation.

¹⁰⁴ KHA Executive Committee minutes, 10.1.34, RBKCCL.KHT collection no.17949.

¹⁰⁵ Fry (1975), 142.

completely enchanted by the modernity and newness of modernism.¹⁰⁶ This, combined with her similar enchantment with Fry may have charged her with the passion to break, once and for all, with the KHT regardless of what might happen in the future.

Denby did not have to wait long for her new career to begin. At a meeting on 6th October 1933, four days after her resignation, the Leverhulme Trust committee agreed to award Denby a personal grant of 350 pounds and expenses of 150 pounds for travelling for the study of slum clearance and rebuilding at home and abroad. The minutes noted that her case was considered to be urgent because of the present slum problem in Britain.¹⁰⁷ On the 26th October, the management committee of the Pioneer Health Centre agreed to offer Mrs Sassoon part of the site on which they were due to build for her flats.¹⁰⁸ A week later Denby was appointed by the directors of the Gas, Light and Coke Company to 'a joint committee of architects and representatives of the company to advise the company on architecture and kindred matters of common interest'.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps Denby knew all this was likely and resigned comforted by thoughts of a promising future.

In the course of ten years Denby had transformed herself from the secretary of a local voluntary organisation in north Kensington into a figure with a commanding knowledge of slum conditions, new housing,

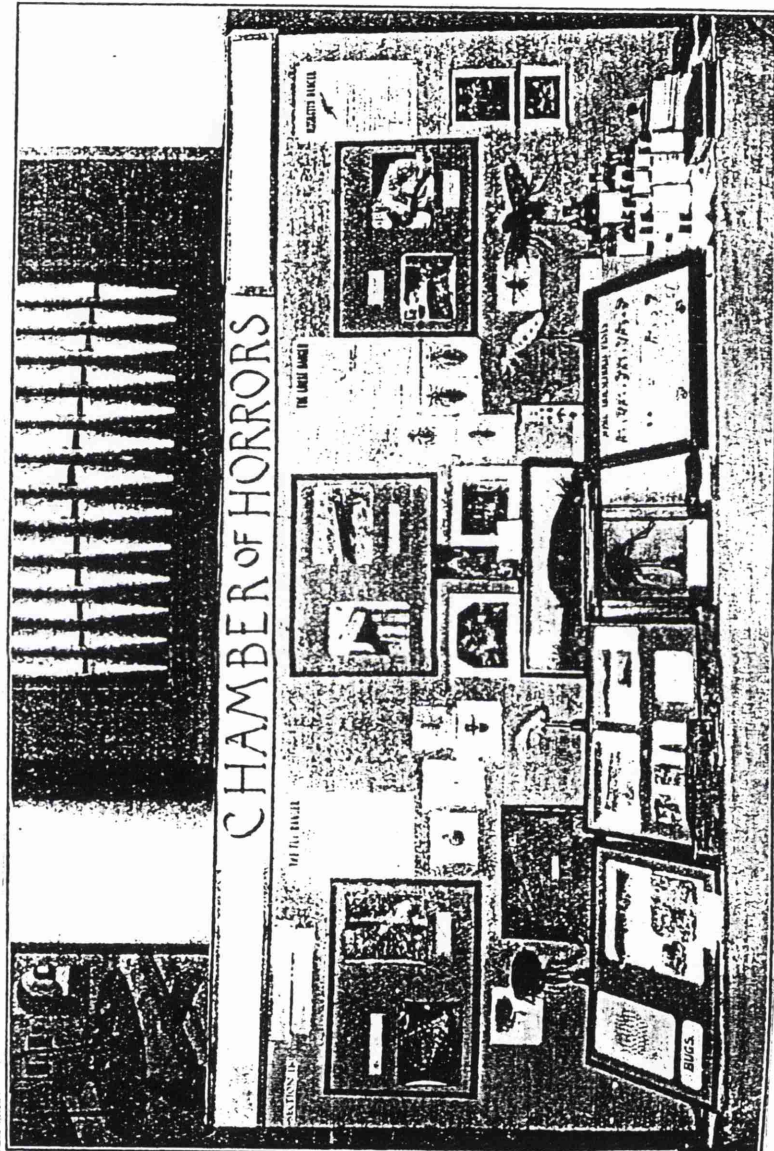
¹⁰⁶ The nature of Fry and Denby's collaboration will be discussed in part two.

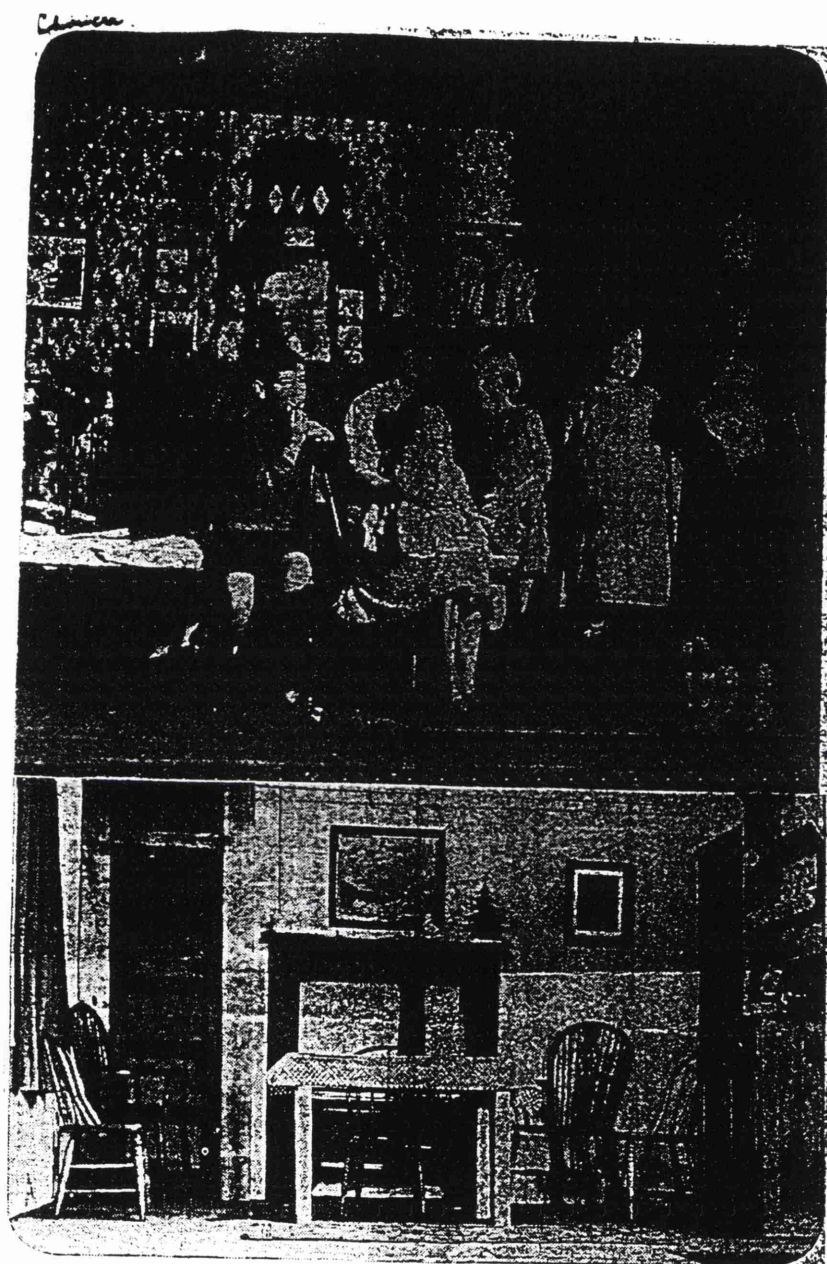
¹⁰⁷ The following year, in September, she applied for an extension of her scholarship and was awarded, following an interview with Professor Carr Saunders in Liverpool, a further grant of 200 pounds. Correspondence with Trust, May 1998.

¹⁰⁸ Minutes of Management Committee of Pioneer Health Centre, 26.10.33, held in Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine Contemporary Medical Archives Centre, (WIHM/CMAC) ref. SA/PHC. The relationship between these two projects will be discussed more fully in chapter 6.

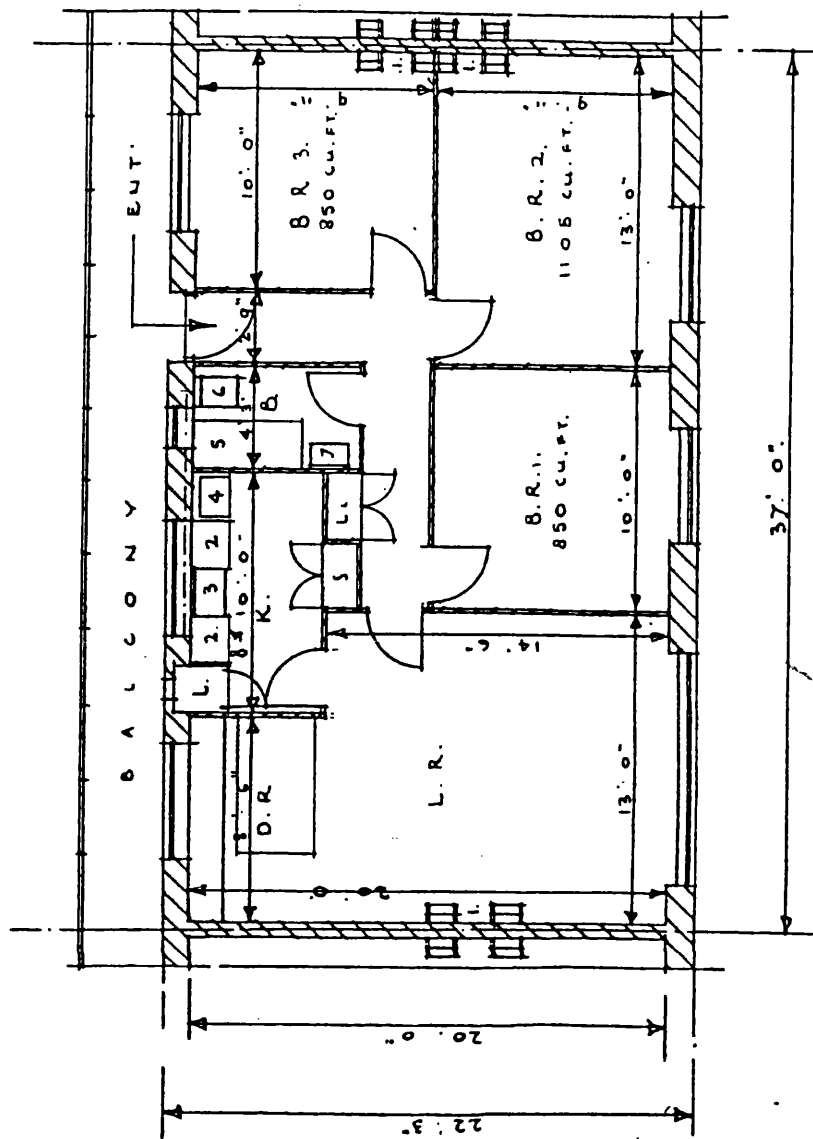
¹⁰⁹ Court of Directors' Minutes, Gas Light & Coke Co, 3.11.33. Held in LMA, ref., B/GLCC/54. Denby's work for the Gas, Light and Coke Co, will be discussed in chapter 7.

housing legislation and policy and design, someone she labelled a housing consultant. Henceforth she would practise this new profession, in so doing offering a significant model of the form new dwellings for slum dwellers might take and participating in many of the key debates about social and cultural policy which would inform post-war policy making.



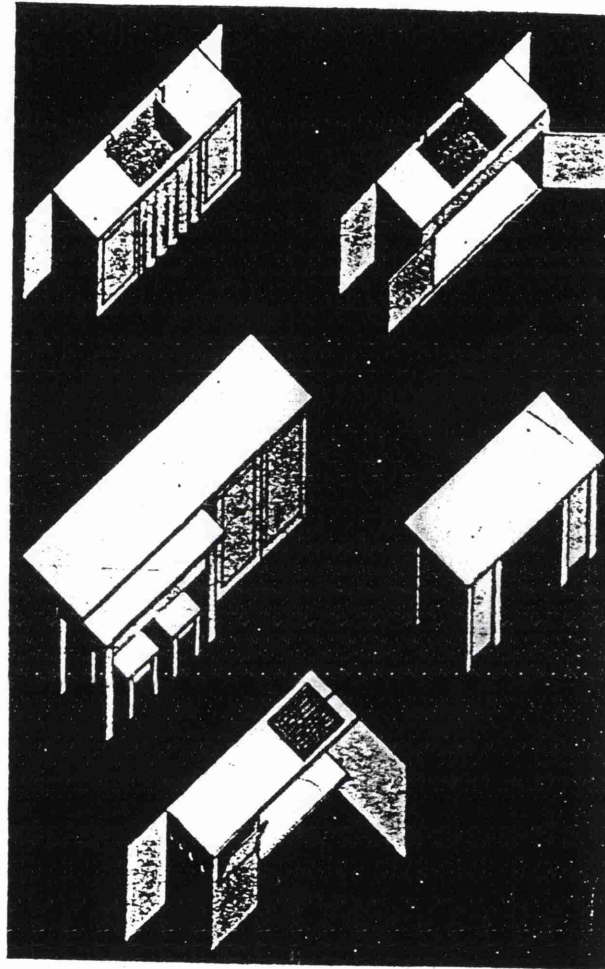


4.2: NHFO 1931: Model Flat Interior



A flat designed by Miss Janet Fletcher and Mrs. Alison Shepherd. References: DR = dining recess; LR = living room; K = kitchen; B = bath-room; BR = bedroom; L = larder; Li = linen; S = stores; 1 = gas fire; 2 = draining board; 3 = sink; 4 = gas cooker; 5 = bath; 6 = w.c.; 7 = basin; 8 = gas copper. The flat as carried out has the positions of the bathroom and entrance reversed. Built-in cupboards also are provided in bedrooms one and two.

Five examples of home-made kitchen furniture. From left to right : 1 : Sink with swing taps and curtain beneath. 2 : Sink with swing taps and cupboard under. 3 : Small table with stools to fit under working bench. 4 : Enamel top table with drawers each end and space for sitting. 5 : This fitment provides a soiled clothes receptacle, a neat cooking fixture and a shelf for pots, etc.



PART TWO
ELIZABETH DENBY, HOUSING CONSULTANT
1933-1939



C: Denby in the 1930s

INTRODUCTION

ELIZABETH DENBY, HOUSING CONSULTANT

In resigning from the KHA/T Elizabeth Denby had initiated the second phase of reinvention in her life: from Organising Secretary to housing consultant. I have already outlined the chronology of events which led to her departure from Kensington, what I want to consider here are the factors, internal and external to her life, which made her believe that someone who combined a knowledge of social welfare and architecture could find work in the 1930s. On the day of her resignation none of the projects with which she was involved had a certain future. What might have made her believe that to resign, perhaps before she was pushed, was not the gamble it might otherwise seem?

The argument here is that although Denby was unique in her attempt to combine design and sociological work into one professional role, the housing consultant, she created this figure in the knowledge first that there existed by the early 1930s a tradition in which women were able to have 'access to and influence over' over the built environment.¹ Second, that new areas of work were opening up for which her skills might prove useful. In the aftermath of the Depression a growth of interest in economic planning and reconstruction by both government and private bodies led to the creation of research organisations and government committees which depended for much of their work on freelance consultants with expertise in particular areas. To these external factors might be added two catalysts which gave Denby the final psychological

¹ I paraphrase this useful concept from Brion and Tinker (1980).

impetus to make a break and begin again: her personality and her relationship with Max Fry. It was this confluence of changing circumstances and personal ambition which enabled Denby to create the housing consultant.

A GENEALOGY OF THE HOUSING CONSULTANT

Since the mid-nineteenth century there had developed an accepted tradition of women's participation and action in debates about the form the built environment should take. Indeed, the multiplicity of roles she and Rachel Alexander held within the KHA/T offered Denby a first-hand example of the way women could participate in housing design and reform. On a broader level, a significant number of women worked as writers, housing managers, surveyors, architects, designers and investigators at this time. It would not have been unusual for a woman to occupy a space in the organisation of the built environment in the inter-war period. What was unusual was Denby's combination of all the roles outlined above into one person. Her multi-disciplinarity may be partly explained by her commitment to the inter-disciplinary learnt in her years in the voluntary sector, but there was also a much more pragmatic reason for her assumption of this combined expertise. Quite simply, she could not assume *one* of the available roles because she either lacked the qualifications to do so and could not afford to gain them, or because they would not have provided her with sufficient income to support herself.² She did, however, have sufficient proficiency in, or familiarity with these roles to make it possible for her to take an advisory, or even practical

² There is no evidence to suggest that Denby had any private income to subsidise her career. Many of those I interviewed about Denby commented that she never appeared to have any money.

stance, when circumstances demanded.

Denby was, then, an heir to tradition established since the 1850s by a generation of middle-class women who had exploited their gender's traditional synonymity with the home to develop careers in the public realm concerned with issues such as sanitary reform, education and housing. Women's presence in the public sphere of work was tolerated so long as they operated in areas associated with their gender. In the context of the built environment, the most important figure in the development of a 'profession' from a gendered path was Octavia Hill.³ The system of housing management by women which she had developed was justified on the basis that it was 'a natural development of women's close association with the home'.⁴ After her death, her system was codified through various training schemes into a quasi-professional discipline by a number of her disciples so that by the 1930s the woman housing manager was a recognised figure.⁵ She had responsibility both for collecting rents and the social welfare of her tenants and the use of her services was much advocated by voluntary housing associations. Its desirability as a potential career for Denby, however, after resignation was limited. By the early 1930s it would have required her to have a training she could not afford. Nor would it have offered her any opportunity to deal with the construction side of housing work which had been one of the reasons for her desire to move away from the KHT and, since women housing managers were not widely employed, the chances of finding work were limited.

³ See Darley (1990) *passim*.

⁴ Jeffery (1931).

⁵ See Brion (1995) for a detailed discussion of the development of training schemes for women housing managers.

Octavia Hill had also established another precedent which led to an association between women's opinions and the form of the built environment: the presence of women on government commissions investigating social problems. Hill gave evidence to the 1884 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes and was widely respected for her views on housing. Several years later, in early 1918, a women's housing sub-committee was appointed by the Ministry of Reconstruction to report on housewives' needs as it prepared plans for a post-war programme of working-class housing construction. The committee included in its membership a number of women from the Women's Labour League and Women's Co-operative Guild, organisations which were committed to promoting the needs of working-class women. Their influence was reflected in the sub-committee's work. It sought through questionnaires, meetings and investigations to put together a survey of what working women wanted in their new homes. These included what would become a familiar litany of desires: a separate workroom for cooking and food preparation, separate bathroom, parlour, labour-saving devices, play spaces, amongst many others. The committee's report, issued in May 1918, although initially subdued for contradicting government's traditionally parsimonious stance on housing policy, was ultimately vindicated when the main housing committee under John Tudor Walters reported on similar lines.⁶ The wartime government may have displayed in their suppression of the women's report an ambivalence towards women's opinions but it did not stop them from legislating that local authorities should make use of women advisers when planning housing schemes.⁷ This does not seem to have happened

⁶ See McFarlane (1984) for a discussion of the women's housing sub-committee.

⁷ Whitaker (1987).

in practice but the provision for it might have suggested, at the very least, a forum through which women like Denby might exert influence.⁸

Another significant way in which women contributed to debates about housing and housing reform was through writing. Both collectively and individually women worked to accumulate and disseminate facts about bad housing and its human cost in the hope of influencing public opinion and state policy. Particularly active in this respect were the Women's Labour League, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Fabian Women's Group. In books like Maud Pember Reeve's *Round about a Pound a Week*, published in 1913, were offered a careful documentation of the hardships facing working-class women as they struggled to make ends meet in dark, damp and insanitary housing. Such work may be seen as part of the huge surge in social investigation work associated with the emergence of social science in this country but equally as another means through which women used the 'inherent' characteristics of their gender to monopolise an area of work and make of it an area of expertise.

In the inter-war decades, a number of women continued this tradition of documentary investigation. Such texts were often published to coincide with and potentially influence, the passage of the various inter-war housing acts. Thus in 1920, Mrs Sanderson Furniss and Marion Phillips (of the ILP) wrote *The Working Woman's Home*, whilst in 1939, Margery Spring Rice's *Working Class Wives*, again drew attention to the need for

⁸ That this was a rather half-hearted commitment becomes clear from Brion's (1995) observation that when central government did establish an advisory body on housing, the Central Housing Advisory Committee, as part of the 1935 Housing Act, it did not include a specific women's section. This led the Society of Women Housing Managers to form the Women's Advisory Housing Council, an independent body, to fill the gap.

women's lives to be taken into account in any rehousing and social reform programme.⁹

An equally important form of writing, and one which expanded in the inter-war period, was the text which gave advice to housewives on how to organise and run their homes. Such books had their origins in the work of writers like the Americans Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine Beecher. In their 1869 book, *The American Woman's Home* they advocated the need to economise 'time, labour and expertise'.¹⁰ In England, Mrs Beeton offered similar advice, like the Stowes, to middle-class women. By the early 1900s this tradition of writing had developed in two respects. Advisory texts started to be written for working-class women, whilst for middle-class women the management of households was developed into an area of expertise. The middle-class housewife became a domestic scientist, domesticity her profession.¹¹ In this process the writings of Christine Frederick were particularly influential. In her quest to professionalise and raise the status of the housewife, Frederick applied the principles of scientific management to the work in, and design of, the home, paying particular attention to the kitchen. This should, she argued, become an efficiently-planned workshop, organised to minimise legwork with every utensil within the housewife's reach. Such work, especially by the inter-war period when there was perceived to be a servant problem, was extremely popular. The concept of the small, efficiently-planned working kitchen became particularly dominant.

⁹ See also Sayle (1924), Chesterton (1936), Quigley and Goldie (1934).

¹⁰ Handlin (1979), ch.6 'Good Housekeeping'.

¹¹ Ehrenreich & English (1979).

To be an expert on household management became another area of work deemed appropriate for women and one for which training systems were developed. It was possible to study domestic science (as Denby's older sister did) and to teach it in schools for both the working and middle classes. The doctrine of scientific housework could also be conveyed through the new women's magazines and household manuals. Many women wrote books for both the middle and working classes which advised on the best way to cope with only a daily maid, or how best to arrange the kitchen to avoid unnecessary labour.¹² Organisations like the Electrical Association for Women, and the Women's Gas Council also campaigned for women's needs to be taken into account in the design of kitchens and their fittings.¹³ A role which was related to or perhaps developed out of this 'literary' expertise was for women to become experts in the design of kitchens on the new scientific lines. Grette Schutte-Lihotzky's *Frankfurter-Kuche* is perhaps the most famous expression of this role, but the world-wide impact of Frederick's ideas is reflected in the fact that in England too, a number of women became expert kitchen designers and advisers.¹⁴ Dorothy Braddell, with whom Denby worked on several projects throughout the 1930s, serves as a good example. She wrote on kitchen design extensively, very much on Frederick lines.¹⁵ She also enjoyed a successful career as a designer of kitchens for both private clients and for industry and government. It may have been the existence of a large body

¹² See Frederick (1915), Peel (1917), Eyles (1922).

¹³ See Worden (1989) for a detailed discussion of the Electrical Association for Women; no similar account exists for the Women's Gas Council.

¹⁴ See Henderson (1996) for a discussion of Schutte-Lihotzky's work.

¹⁵ Dorothy Braddell, or Mrs Darcy Braddell, is an interesting figure about whom little, like so many of her contemporaries, is known. She designed kitchens for the British Commercial Gas Association; Electrical Association for Women; Aga; for the Council for Art & Industry amongst others. For her writings see Braddell (1934/1939). The Archive of Art & Design holds some examples of Braddell's work: AAD 2/82-1980-2/110-1980.

of literature on kitchen design by the early 1930s which enabled Denby, as has already been noted, to begin her career outside the Trust by writing on the subject and to go on to be responsible for the design of the kitchens in both Sassoon House and Kensal House. For her to have become solely a writer and designer of kitchens was, however, difficult, given the competition and her lack of design training.

Braddell's work as a designer serves also as a reminder of the newest area of work for women within the built environment by the inter-war period: the architectural and building professions. At this date women architects were still relatively few, reflecting the fact that women had only recently gained access to professional training. The option of an architectural career, though it may have been what Denby really wanted to do, was not a realistic one for her.¹⁶ Few opportunities for training were available when she left school and by the time architecture schools began to accept women as students, she could not afford to train for a new career.

Denby was faced with a similar problem in connection to a similarly 'new' profession, surveying. This had been one of the professions opened up to women in the wake of the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act. Amongst the first to benefit from this legislation were Irene Barclay and Eileen Perry who on qualification had set up in practice together, working primarily as surveyors and estate managers to the SPHIS. This they combined with investigative work, producing a series of surveys of

¹⁶ In the war years, despite having no formal architectural qualifications, Denby seems to have established a mini-practice at her home in Princes St, Hanover Square, from which she worked on designs for versions of the All-Europe House and prefabricated housing for Tarran Industries.

housing and overcrowding in London's boroughs.¹⁷ Although ^{their work} ~~^~~ lacked a design element, ^{in its} mixture of management, surveying and propaganda, ^{it} offers the closest kinship with what Denby would do. ^{however,} ~~It was,~~ made possible by their professional training as chartered surveyors. If this was to be a path for Denby to follow, like architecture it required a training for which she could not pay.

As a single choice for a career, each of the women's role outlined above was not viable. They did show, however, that there were accepted ways for women to comment about and have a potential influence on the form of housing and the built environment. The question remains that beyond her own zeal and commitment, what made Denby think that by taking a part of each of these roles and combining them into the figure of the housing consultant she could make a space for herself in the building world? The suggestion here is that circumstances were sufficiently favourable in the 1930s to allow at least one figure like her to come into existence. She had her connection with the Prince of Wales to whom she had acted (and may have continued to act) as housing adviser. This showed a potential demand, and endorsement, for her type of work. The move towards a slum clearance programme by central government, and the existence of a provision for women to advise, also provided a possible site of activity. Significant too is the fact that although areas of expertise in housing and social reform were developing in the inter-war period, many of them reinforced by professional training, there still did not exist a sufficient framework within government or the civil service to ^{sustain} professional practices. It was still just possible to be an expert on housing

¹⁷ See Barclay (1976).

without being qualified as a housing manager or an architect.

A CULTURE OF CONSULTANCY

The fact that at least one figure like Denby could work as a housing consultant also reflects the fact that by the early 1930s the political climate had changed such that there was a demand for people with particular areas of expertise who could advise on the best ways to solve particular social or economic problems. Many historians have noted how in the wake of the the Depression a widespread interest in the planned reconstruction of the nation's economy emerged on all sides of the political spectrum.¹⁸ Economic planning was to replace the 'discredited ethic of laissez-faire'.¹⁹ Several think-tank groups were founded in this decade which sought to influence central government policy making whilst operating outside of it. Political and Economic Planning, founded in 1931, for example, saw its role as 'a bridge between research and policy making...[it would] study problems of public concern, to find out the facts, to present them impartially, to suggest ways in which the knowledge would be applied'.²⁰ It did this by the formation of working groups who would study a particular problem, calling in experts and consultants as needed. Amongst its investigations was one into housing for which Denby served as consultant.²¹

Central government also responded to this new interest in research, most relevantly here in the field of design. In the early 1930s it renewed its interest in the state of British design; its improvement and reform was

¹⁸ See Marwick (1964), Tomlinson (1992), for example.

¹⁹ Ritschel (1991), 41.

²⁰ Pinder (1981), 5.

²¹ PEP (1934).

seen as one way of improving the economy both at home and overseas. This was manifested in the establishment of the Council for Art and Industry (CAI) at the end of 1933 which set up a number of sub-committees to investigate various aspects of British design culture to which experts in particular fields were recruited. Again, this would prove a significant area of work for Denby; she would work as an adviser to the CAI on several occasions throughout the 1930s and early 1940s.

This new demand for advisers and experts from think-tank groups and central government alike opened up a significant area of work for Denby. In this context, her diversity of knowledge outweighed her lack of qualifications^{since the} different aspects of her knowledge could go wherever they were needed. If she had been solely an architect, or a surveyor or a housing manager her options might well have been much more restricted.

HOUSING CONSULTANCY

The two factors outlined above may have suggested to Denby that there were available opportunities for work which would enable her to support herself as a housing consultant. The fact that she managed to pursue this career throughout the rest of the decade, suggests that circumstances were favourable enough to allow at least one figure like her to practise. This may explain why no similar figures have come to light, there existed only sufficient work to support one such figure. Denby happened to be in the right place at the right time. Additionally, the role of consultant was only conceivable given the more fluid circumstances of her day; her areas of expertise were not yet fully codified by professional organisations. Her position was, however, never so stable that she did not have to work

constantly to ensure a demand for her work. This led her, on the one hand, to develop the skilful command of the media she had learnt in the voluntary sector, as well as to make continuous attempts to ally herself with people and organisations who could serve her cause, as much as she could serve them.

In this respect, although much of what Denby did was due to the circumstances with which she was faced, it seems important to stress that she was not the passive victim of her circumstances. Rather, she had sufficient personal courage to create something new from a difficult set of circumstances. Her encounter and subsequent 'partnership' with Fry may have made Denby feel secure enough to break with the KHA/T but he may be best seen as the catalyst to an existing set of beliefs and circumstances. Denby's description of herself as someone meant to improve the lives of ordinary working people must be borne in mind in any attempt to explain why Denby took the decisions she did. When it became impossible to do this in the way she wanted, as happened at the KHA/T, she had to move on and seek another course of action. Provided she did not have to compromise her own social philosophy too much, she would ally herself with those groups who were best positioned to effect social change. Denby's tenacious character was a central factor in enabling her to make a place for herself throughout her career.

The coming together of a set of circumstances both internal and external led Denby to forge the role of housing consultant. In the following chapters I shall show how, in a period of just under seven years, she played a significant role in debates about the most appropriate type of

housing for former slum-dwellers^{and} the furnishing of their new homes and the promotion of their health and well-being. Her ideas and solutions to these problems were influenced by a number of factors. The relative precariousness of her role would always have a strong impact on her work, so too would the practical and political realities of committee and design work. Combined with this were more ideological influences, amongst them her engagement with modernism and the most significant, and long-lasting, the influence of Idealist philosophy acquired at the LSE and reinforced by her work in the voluntary sector.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAKING SPACE, MAKING ALLIES, MAKING FRIENDS

In order to achieve her ambition of dealing with the new housing which would replace the slums Denby had decided to break her ties with the KHA/T and work alone. Given the rather strained circumstances of her departure her delight at her new found independence can be imagined, but this new status was not without problems. By quitting the Trust Denby not only left behind an atmosphere which stifled her ambitions but also the security of an organisation and the moral support and strength in numbers that it could offer. There was also the problem that until Sassoon House was completed it would be some time before a tangible expression of her consultancy could be seen. This meant that in the year between her resignation and the opening of Sassoon House in November 1934 Denby needed, at the same time as she worked on the projects she had already secured, to seek ways to keep herself in the public eye and draw attention to her expertise in order to continue to make work for herself. A related issue was to find alternative sources of support to the KHA/T. It is the concern in this chapter to elaborate what these were, and to discuss what they reveal about the context in which Denby worked in the 1930s.

To solve these problems Denby pursued three main strategies. Journalism continued to be a significant means for self-promotion. An equally important activity was the forging of alliances with people and organisations who, like her, were trying to make a space for themselves in the context of central government's shift to a policy of slum clearance and

new building. These could provide her with an equivalent source of support to that she had had at the KHA/T. Finally, another source of support came from friendships with the men and women she met in the course of the decade. Such relationships, though they could often lead to work, may be best understood as a source of comradeship, an informal network of support from which to draw strength whilst remaining independent.

MAKING SPACE

Denby had already begun writing for the press during 1933, mostly on kitchen design. Between 1934 and 1935 she expanded her range of subject matter and produced a number of articles on the issue of slum clearance. From these it is possible to extrapolate the theory of housing which she would practise as a consultant and detect how she grafted the new influences to which she opened herself in this period onto the body of knowledge learnt in Kensington. She drew much from her engagement with modernism but an equally important source for new ideas was the research she began to carry out for her book *Europe Rehoused*. In 1934 alone, she visited housing projects in France, Finland and Sweden.¹ Such research served to increase her knowledge and thus her expertise in the arena of social housing, whilst through the journalism and lecturing which derived from this work she could make a space for herself in housing debates as someone whose opinions mattered and who was worthy of consultation.

¹ Mary Medd (Crowley), correspondence Sept.1995, says that she and Denby visited Scandinavia sometime during 1934. Also, Denby's April 1934 article for *Design for Today* makes extensive reference to the new estates outside Paris at Drancy and Bagneux, suggesting a visit in late 1933 or early 1934. See Denby (1934c).

An analysis of the three major articles which she wrote on slum clearance during 1934 and 1935 allows a clear view of the position Denby came to occupy on rehousing. The first, published in *Design for Today* of April 1934, was "Planning Future Cities, 'Slum Clearance' is no policy". The second was a review of the report of the Council for Research into Housing Construction which appeared in the *Architects' Journal* the following June. The last, in the *Architects' Journal* of May 1935, was another review, this time of the entries to the Cement Marketing Company's competition for the design of working-class flats.² She also made minor elaborations to the points raised in these texts in short articles and letters to the press.³ Three themes dominate the articles: the need for research and planning before any major programme of clearance; the adoption of the latest advances in technology to reduce costs of production; and the need to develop new types of flatted accommodation and amenities for the rehoused slum dwellers.

In her discussion of research and planning, Denby's concern was to challenge central government's definition of what constituted the housing problem and the method through which it chose to attack it. The problem, as she saw it, was the piecemeal nature of the government's approach. It had elected to deal only with the clearance and improvement of slum areas; all other housing was to be the province of private enterprise. This was wrong for two reasons. The surplus population displaced by clearance and reconditioning would be 're-housed in dormitory suburbs sprawling unregulated and unplanned over the surrounding countryside at the

² Denby (1934c, d) and (1935c).

³ Denby (1934e) and (1935b).

caprice of the private speculator'.⁴ She also observed that the increase in London's population between 1921 and 1931 could have been housed in ten planned satellite towns 'complete with industry and all communal advantages' if the benefits of town planning had been acknowledged.⁵ These points fed into her main argument which was that in the government's focus on housing alone, the real issue slum clearance overlooked was '[that it was] a component part of the replanning of industrial areas, one that cannot be dealt with efficiently, constructively or economically as a separate problem'.⁶ The solution lay in the complete replanning of whole cities, not just areas within them. She suggested the south or east of London would be a good place to begin.⁷ A vital part of such a plan was the need for research which would establish the full extent of the slum problem and from which national standards of fitness for the new housing could be determined.⁸ The result would be new cities in which every aspect was planned. To reiterate her point she made approving reference to the example of Henri Sellier's scheme of planned satellite cities around Paris.

Denby's second theme, of the need to harness technological advance to housing schemes was very much an extension of her demand for a planned approach to the reorganisation of the built environment. In her writing she stressed the importance of reducing costs, especially in view of the 'unattractive but expensive specimens [of flats] we possess in Great

⁴ Denby (1934c), 122.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Denby (1934d), 939.

⁷ Denby (1934c).

⁸ Denby (1934d), 937.

Britain.⁹ Reiterating the subject of her first letter to the press she asked 'Where is the seizure of the great possibilities offered by mass-production in improving, in cheapening, in bringing new help into the home?'.¹⁰ She pointed again to the example of the Parisian satellite cities where every effort had been made to use advanced technology to bring down costs and improve amenities. The Mopin system of frame-and-panel construction lowered construction costs; whilst each flat had a hygienic system of water-borne refuse disposal with the installation of the Garchy system. Fuel costs were lowered by a centralised heating system which, she noted, also had the added advantage of smoke abatement since it used smokeless fuels.¹¹ The individual flats were also planned to be labour-saving with built-in furniture and dust-free finishes. She noted 'every saving due to technical skill and foresight seems to have been passed onto the tenant in increased amenities'.¹²

Attention to amenities was the third component of Denby's approach to housing. Whilst her interest in technology may be partly attributed to the influence of Fry and his fellow modernists, her concern for the communal life of tenants and her interest in the composition and management of new flatted estates is a reminder of the discourses of citizenship and the influence of the Idealism in which she had been nurtured. Echoes of the rhetoric employed at the NHFO are clear in her discussion of what form new housing should take. 'Where', she asked, 'is the life, hope and vigour which should inform such an exhilarating event as the beginnings of a

⁹ Denby (1934d), 938.

¹⁰ Denby (1934c), 126.

¹¹ Denby (1934e).

¹² Denby (1934c), 126.

new way of life for a group of families?'.¹³ Current government policy, she argued, was to replace slum housing with its vertical equivalent: 'Noah's arks towering above the surrounding properties...cottages above one another, but without the cottage garden or cottage privacy. In fact, they are the rows of industrial cottages opening directly on to the common balcony street'.¹⁴ If flats were to ^{be} built then a radical rethink of their form and organisation was necessary; advantage had to be taken of the land which was freed by building five, or even, ten-storey blocks. This could be developed into amenities for the estate: allotments which provided not just food but also healthy exercise; playgrounds for the children; open spaces for all the tenants. As a substitute for the cottage garden, every flat should have a private balcony. Denby also considered ways to promote community life in new estates. It should be recognised, she argued, that each new block was analogous to a small village and as such should have the equivalent of a village hall built into each block. This was 'essential for communal life - somewhere to make and mend, to learn and to play'.¹⁵

This interest in the life lived in the new flats was central to Denby's philosophy of housing. She wanted to avoid the mistakes made in the rehousing policy of the 1920s which had led to new towns 'composed entirely of one section of society'. Slum populations had been moved from the heart of their parent city to the 'loneliness of hygienic homes', away from 'the glitter of the streets, cinemas, public houses'.¹⁶ In Denby's view, in any new housing built every effort should be made to try and simulate the nature of communities which had grown up over time: 'towns are

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Denby (1934e), 270.

¹⁶ Denby (1934d), 939.

built bit by bit with tradition behind them, with a vertical instead of a horizontal citizenship, and this tradition is one of the principles which must guide all rehousing effort, if it is to satisfy the needs of the generation undergoing this sea-change'.¹⁷ The notion of a vertical citizenship, of people from diverse backgrounds sharing an environment, has clear echoes of settlement philosophy. It could be achieved, she argued, by following the model of practice she had seen outside Paris. At Bagneux and Drancy a mixture of housing types was built: flats, houses and maisonettes, some for richer tenants, the majority for the less well-off, with additional provision for 'the old, the unmarried and the artist'.¹⁸ The mix of housing of both slum clearance standard and above was, she stated, something 'which I consider of vital importance'.¹⁹ In this way the roots of the slum tradition could be cut off. For generations slum dwellers had lived in surroundings 'which preclude any standard of values measured by civilised standards'. By removing people to new estates with vertical citizenship former slum dwellers would be able to improve themselves through exposure to the example of others; a notion of mutual help which is a further reminder of her adherence to the Idealist tradition.²⁰

Denby envisaged a housing policy which through centralised planning and the adoption of advances in technology could provide estates with a variety of housing for a diversity of tenants who would have access to extensive communal facilities and live in well-equipped and planned dwellings. Such housing required 'courage and enterprise, imagination

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Denby (1934c), 123.

¹⁹ Denby (1934d), 939.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 942.

and a determination to secure every new invention, every improvement, every beauty, and bring them within reach of the humblest family...'. This would be worthwhile, she continued, for '[it would] not only create a civilised community, but [would] save an expenditure from the common rates on health serves, on scavenging, on prisons. It's not a bad investment'.²¹

This was a very clear and wide-ranging philosophy of housing. It was, however, firmly in opposition to government policy both as it had existed and as it appeared to be unfolding. What Denby needed to do, then, was find ways in which she could campaign for her philosophy to be adopted either by central government or a similarly-powerful body and thus create work for herself advising on the housing then built. One way to do this was through writing, another through her practical work at Sassoon House and Kensal House but, as I have already noted, these were long-term projects. In the meantime she would have to find other ways to promote her work and her ideas.

Although Denby had elected to work as an independent consultant rather than to work for one employer as she had done at the KHA/T, at least in the short term it would be hard for her to achieve reform without, in some way, working through or on behalf of institutions and organisations. So in the first years of her practice as a consultant, 1933 to 1936, Denby collaborated with groups and organisations who shared her ideas on housing. Such alliances enabled her to promote herself in the safety of numbers. They served also as a means to demonstrate that her ideas

²¹ Denby (1934c), 126.

were not one-offs but formed part of what might be described as an alternative mainstream, something which would ultimately have significant influence on housing policy in post-war Britain. Collective action, as the NHFO group had realised, might gain more than individuals acting alone.

There were, then, many advantages to such alliances but there were also disadvantages. A central difficulty lay in the inherent problem of an individual (and, in this case, an individualist) allying herself to a group. This created a fundamental imbalance in the relationship between Denby and her collaborators; the power of the collective would always be stronger than she. Such an alliance required compromise on her part if she were to continue to benefit from the legitimisation it brought. As will be seen, Denby was not always able to sustain the position of compromise required by institutions.

A further and related problem was one of competition for influence in the new housing programme. During the 1920s and early 1930s it had only been the voluntary sector, of which Denby was part, which had displayed an interest in the problem of low-rental housing. The housing acts of the thirties created a very different set of circumstances. New interest groups emerged, among them the architectural profession, which were keen to influence the course future housing policy should take. At the same time the voluntary housing sector reconfigured itself into an advisory body, the Housing Centre, again with the aim of affecting government policy. It was with such groups that the reinvented Denby collaborated; something which placed her in a curious position of at once working with them but

also being in competition with them for work and influence. At this date, however, it seems that the mutual benefit of unity outweighed competitiveness but in the long term, the likelihood of an individual winning against a group was not high.

Between 1934 and 1936 Denby's main allies were the newly-founded Housing Centre and the MARS Group which was founded in March 1933.²² Together they worked on the NHFO exhibitions of 1934 and 1936. By discussing the role Denby took in this collaboration a sense of the new circumstances in which she was now operating and the paths she had to negotiate to make work and space is made apparent.

The Housing Centre had been formed in the context of the realisation by the London voluntary housing societies that henceforth their role as suppliers of low-rental housing would be supplanted by local authorities. If the sector could no longer provide housing and effect change through building, then in line with Macadam's definition of the New Philanthropy it had to seek an alternative but, with luck, equally influential role. Hence it was formed 'to promote better housing conditions for the people of Great Britain, through organised Publicity, Information and Research'.²³ It would act as an umbrella group for experts in housing who operated outside of government; a role indicated by its absorption of both the UFC and the NHFO Group, and the decision to share its premises with the Mansion House Council and the GCTPA.

²² For a contemporary's account of the Housing Centre, see Halton (1934). For a more detailed discussion of the MARS Group than is possible here, see Campbell (1985) and Shipley (1990).

²³ HCT Archive, file c/5.

By absorbing the NHFO group, the Centre took on the responsibility for organising the exhibition on housing scheduled for 1934 and subsequently 1936.²⁴ Amongst those who contributed to these exhibitions were some newcomers to the committee: the MARS Group, first brought in in 1934. Its arrival marked the entry into the housing debate of one of the new interest groups which had emerged as government shifted to a policy of construction, the architectural profession.

Until the early 1930s very few architects, except for those associated with the early NHFO exhibitions, had shown an interest in social housing. In the main it had been town planners and the planning side of the architectural profession, like Raymond Unwin, who had been most active in the anti-slum campaign, something they pursued under the auspices of the GCTPA rather than the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).²⁵ The passage and introduction of the Housing Act in 1933 seems to have led to a new interest in a field which promised a potentially vast area of work at a time of economic depression; something reflected in an increase in the number of articles on the slum problem in the architectural press.²⁶ Significant too was the passing of the first Registration Act for architects in 1934 which inaugurated a period of debate amongst them about the nature and future of professional practice. The way was open for interest groups amongst the profession to seek to influence practice to their advantage.

²⁴ A further exhibition was held in 1938, its theme rural housing. Since none of the protagonists under discussion here were involved, I shall not discuss it.

²⁵ Unwin opened the 1932 NHFO exhibition, and was active in the work of the National Housing Committee.

²⁶ See, for example, *AJ* (1933a) and (1933b) and *AR* (1933b) and (1933c).

The emergence of the MARS Group onto the British architectural scene at precisely the time these major shifts in practice and work were developing was then significant. MARS was not an ad-hoc collective but a serious organisation with a well-defined programme of what architecture should constitute and what type of role the architect should play. Its aim, as Fry, one of its founders, later explained, was to work for the adoption of modernism as the doctrine of British architecture, something to be achieved by first converting 'the talkative intellectuals of the age'.²⁷ Participation in the NHFO exhibition offered the opportunity to work with a leading body of such intellectuals, the Housing Centre, and present its ideas at an exhibition visited by large numbers of the building and architectural professions as well as ^{politicians from both} local and national government.

The campaign to promote modernism was underway, a process which would reach final fruition after 1945.

That the MARS Group had something to contribute to NHFO was due to its commitment, 'to work towards the solution of contemporary problems in architecture [through research]' which, given the doctrine it espoused and contemporary circumstances, meant slum clearance and rebuilding.²⁸ This was a subject on which Fry had already written in the architectural press, observing that '[the housing problem] requires a new architecture. It requires a new and larger building organisation. And finally, it must be approached as town planning'.²⁹ Such an approach was absorbed into MARS' research programme when, in October 1933 the Executive Committee published a paper, 'Slum Clearance: Short Term Programme',

²⁷ Fry (c.1975).

²⁸ Shipley (1990), 2

²⁹ Fry (1933a) 366, also Fry (1933b).

in which it declared its intention to organise ‘...a fully articulated programme of slum clearance research...’.³⁰ The ultimate aim was to ‘...bring together all the necessary information, both technical and social, in its proper form, in order to begin a replanning scheme in a particular area, which should be of universal urban application...’.³¹ The area chosen as a focus for its research was Bethnal Green and it worked with the hope that the investigation might become an exhibition.

Five months later the opportunity to do this came. By March 1934 work had begun on organising the NHFO exhibition which would take place the following September.³² An early indication of the new formality and emphasis on expertise which would henceforth characterise NHFO was that the chair of the exhibition committee was not someone whose background and training was in the voluntary sector but rather a professional architect, Judith Ledeboer, who seems to have worked with Denby as her assistant.³³ Ledeboer had trained at the Architectural Association (AA) and was listed as an assistant on the ‘New Building’ sections of the 1932 and 1933 NHFO exhibitions. It is not clear how she came to be involved with NHFO, though it seems possible that her fellow AA students Janet Pott and Alison Sheperd^h may have been the connection. Unlike them, however, she remained closely connected with

³⁰ “Slum Clearance: Short Term Programme” SaG/90/2. MARS documents amongst the papers of Samuel Godfrey, held in the BAL.

³¹ “Organisation of MARS for NHFO”, ArO/2/6/3. MARS documents amongst the papers of Ove Arup, BAL.

³² This is the first date for which evidence survives: Minutes of special meeting to discuss slum clearance, 11.3.34, SaG/90/2. As was the case for the earlier NHFO exhibitions, no complete set of minutes for its organisation survives and I have reconstructed the genesis of the 1934 and 1936 exhibitions from the minutes of the MARS Group and ATO amongst the papers of Samuel Godfrey and Ove Arup, as well as from the contemporary press and the HCT Archive.

³³ Minutes show Denby’s regular attendance at meetings; she seems to have acted primarily as liaison between NHFO and MARS.

the NHFO group and on the founding of the Housing Centre became a member of its management committee.³⁴

With Ledebøer in charge, the emphasis of the NHFO display shifted from exposing the extent of the slum problem to the display of a technique of slum clearance. Her starting point for this was the question: 'are we wise to rush into this vast rebuilding without making the subject of housing and replacement a matter of serious and specialised study?'. The 1934 exhibition would demonstrate what this meant, a study which required 'the enlistment of the best brains of the country'.³⁵ The solution, which went on display in September at the Building Trades Exhibition in Olympia, was 'a planned attack on the slums'.³⁶

It was this decision which led to the invitation to the MARS Group.³⁷ Ledebøer's method was to divide the exhibition into sections which dealt with the various techniques which constituted this planned attack, each organised by a person or persons with 'the best brain'. A group of professional architects who had carried out research into new planning techniques fitted this approach. It seems likely that Denby would have been aware of MARS' interest in slum clearance, given that she and Fry had known each other for some time by this date, and seen in the NHFO exhibition a space where the group to which her collaborator belonged might display their work. Ledebøer, who as Chair would presumably have had the final say on the invitation to participate would, more than likely,

³⁴ Though Ledebøer is clearly someone of considerable interest, both to the history of social housing and as a woman architect, information on her is scarce. See *The Independent* (1991) and Walker (1997).

³⁵ Ledebøer (1934), 407-408.

³⁶ *Town & Country Planning* (1934), 142.

³⁷ Minutes of MARS Executive Committee, March 1934, SaG/90/2.

have have been familiar with the Group, either through Denby or the architectum| press.

MARS grasped the chance. Fry and Coates wrote to their fellow MARS members that the opportunity presented, '...the means of launching the MARS Bethnal Green and other allied programmes...'.³⁸ That it also allowed MARS to inaugurate the process of establishing modernism as the future architectural ideology of the profession is clear from a memo sent to members by the Executive Committee. It begins by referring to the recent publication by the Council for Research on Housing Construction, which it noted '[was] the first indication from semi-official sources that the ideas and methods of MARS are likely to win considerable sympathy in official circles'.³⁹ It continued: 'on the threshold of what promises to be a decade dominated by an enormous amount of slum clearance and housing work, it should not be necessary to point out to MARS members how valuable this Bethnal Green programme will be to them, quite apart from its value as propaganda'.⁴⁰

Ledeboer assigned the MARS Group to the 'Suggestions' part of the exhibition which dealt with what would replace the slums. This decision forms part of one of the most revealing aspect of her matching of expertise to particular aspects of the technique of slum clearance. Whether by accident or design, Ledeboer tended to assign voluntary sector workers to the non-constructional aspects of the housing problem, and professional architects and planners to those sections which dealt with new building,

³⁸ Letter to MARS' members, May 1934, from Coates & Fry, SaG/90/2.

³⁹ The Council for Research on Housing Construction (1934). The book promoted the use of advanced technology to bring down building costs.

⁴⁰ Executive Committee memo ArO/2/6/4, 21.6.34.

presaging the demarcation of interests in housing which would characterise post-war housing practice. Whilst such an approach fitted the logic of directing experts to the most relevant tasks under the central direction of an umbrella group (or in this case, person) which the Centre was trying to promote, in such a practice lay potential danger for it went against the role Denby was then practising of someone who combined these disciplines in one person. At this date, however, she was secure. The Centre was operating on the fringes of housing policy and the technique it proposed was still theoretical. And, in the context of building up her career and status, it also suited Denby to be presented as one of a team of experts.

NEW HOMES FOR OLD, 1934

In September 1934, the fourth NHFO exhibition was opened at the Building Trades Exhibition at Olympia. Visitors entered the display through a reconstruction of a slum alley [5.1]. This would remind them of what 'are likely to become things of the past'.⁴¹ It also acted as a sharp contrast to the sections ahead which demonstrated the component parts of the planned attack on such conditions, summarised in the catalogue:

...slum clearance should be considered only as a small part of a general policy for housing. The Housing Policy of a nation should include a survey of all related requirements, such as Town Planning, traffic regulation, the placing of Industry and of schools, preservation of open spaces, and the organisation of the building industry etc. Only by means of such a completely comprehensive policy will the prevention of slums in the future be ensured⁴²

On leaving 'Slum Alley', the first section to deal with reconstruction was entered: 'Slum Clearance and Rehousing'. This was organised by Mrs

⁴¹ Housing Centre (1934), 6.

⁴² *Ibid*, 5.

Martin and Mr Stratton of the Mansion House Council on Housing in conjunction with Ledeboer and Jocelyn Abram, two volunteers and two professionals. Although the display included the by-now standard NHFO charts detailing the extent of the shortage, rent costs and similar statistics, the chief concern of this display was to illustrate the development of housing standards, with emphasis placed particularly on the need to build to the highest level: 'it will clearly pay to build well now and avoid the erection of human cages, which are a mockery of housing'.⁴³ The acceptance by the Housing Centre that it was public authorities who would shoulder responsibility for low-cost housing was, perhaps, reflected in the observation that 'from the day that Municipal Authorities took part [in housing], an improvement became perceptible'.⁴⁴

Section three, 'Suggestions', was the contribution of the MARS Group which described itself in the catalogue as 'architects and allied technicians united by a common belief in the necessity for a new conception of architecture and its relation to society'.⁴⁵ The Group had worked on its display since June 1934. The original intention had been to use the research on Bethnal Green to produce a universal model for urban planning. That this was not quite what was finally put on display reflects the ambition of such a programme and the laxity of the members in getting work done, Fry and Coates spent a great deal of time cajoling members into producing work.⁴⁶ The proposed replanning scheme did not materialise instead the MARS display, which was presented on a series of panels was, in effect, an extremely thorough survey, or in their

⁴³ *Ibid*, 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

⁴⁶ Letter to MARS' members, May 1934, from Coates & Fry, SaG/90/2.

terms 'analysis', of Bethnal Green under three categories: density, circulation, surface utilisation [5.2]. This represented 'the first step...to solve the problem of urban replanning',⁴⁷ 'the existing bases upon which any future work will have to be built up'.⁴⁸

MARS' emphasis on the need to carry out a programme of research before any scheme of planning could be begun fitted in well with the general temper of the exhibition (and that of the Housing Centre as a whole). Its message was reinforced in the following section on 'Town Planning', curated by another professional, Jocelyn Abram. She stressed the need for the adoption by government of a methodical approach to slum clearance on the basis that 'rehousing without planning may do more harm in the end than temporary good'.⁴⁹ Abram emphasised the economic advantages of planning and, with a perceptive nod to the conservative nature of the government, noted that industry had been among the first to appreciate these.⁵⁰

The 'Suggestions' section of the exhibition was organised to proceed from the general to the particular, so MARS' and Abram's discussion of the planning of the region and the city was followed by a consideration of the planning and equipment of the proposed new dwellings organised by Denby. In the first two NHFO exhibitions, which she had curated, she had allocated herself the displays on both the construction and equipment of new housing. In 1934, with Ledeboer as chair, for Denby to have been assigned a section which dealt solely with interior fittings seems an

⁴⁷ Housing Centre (1934), 9.

⁴⁸ Yorke & Townsend (1934), 411.

⁴⁹ Housing Centre (1934), 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

interesting shift. It may reflect Ledeboer's practice of allocating areas which dealt with construction to professionals from the building world which, as already suggested, presaged the demarcation of expertise in the post-war housing world. Alternatively, seen in the context of Denby's attempts to promote her career as consultant, which at this time centred mainly on her knowledge of planning and amenities, her responsibility for a display which dealt with just this subject could be understood as a deliberate choice on her part; it served as the best way to draw attention to her expertise.

Denby's display repeated much of what she had said in 1932 and her journalism. Her concern was to explore how low-rental accommodation could best be planned to the benefit of both the producer and consumer, with particular attention paid to the design of flats since this was the most likely form of slum clearance rehousing. For this to work, she argued in the catalogue, a wide range of factors had to be considered. The design of communal circulation spaces in block dwellings was important. Again she stressed the need to incorporate balconies, necessary 'both for health and recreation...and a direct means of contributing towards civilised and homely living'.⁵¹ To make the point more forcibly a model balcony was constructed,⁵² and illustrations of approved examples displayed, including drying balconies, a feature she had seen at Bagneux.

As in 1932 she also discussed what should go inside flats: lighting 'which has perhaps not yet received adequate consideration in this country'; heating, hot water and cooking appliances 'the core of successful house

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵² Designed by Pott & Sheperd.

planning and construction'; and furniture and fittings. She noted that in rehousing schemes there was 'considerable scope for good inexpensive furniture'.⁵³

After Denby's discussion of the private sphere of the flat interior, the final section of the exhibition, 'Amenities', dealt with the public sphere of the new estates and was arranged by Lady (Marjory) Allen of Hurtwood, Denby's close friend. Allen was another figure new to the NHFO exhibitions and, given the content of her display, seems to have been recruited on the basis of her role as an advocate of nursery schools. The emphasis in 'Amenities' was on the need for 'the new [housing] schemes [to] incorporate facilities for a happy home life and a successful community life', themes Denby had articulated in her writing of the period.⁵⁴ A number of suggestions were displayed as to how this might be achieved. Given the presence of modernist architects at the exhibition the attention Allen paid to the potential of the flat roof is interesting. This, she noted, was likely to become increasingly common and could be put to a number of beneficial uses including gardens, sunbathing, children's playgrounds and nursery schools. A display on this latter amenity formed a considerable part of Allen's section and was something she and the voluntary housing sector promoted as a vital part of rehousing schemes. This reflected the belief that one of the most effective ways to end the slum problem was by focusing on children. Attendance at nursery from the age of one 'would cut off the slum tradition at the root'.⁵⁵ Allen concluded her contribution to the catalogue with a statement which

⁵³ Housing Centre (1934), 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵⁵ Denby (1934d), 942.

reiterated the breadth and sentiment of the Housing Centre approach, 'slum clearance is not enough; we must build with pride and hope'.⁵⁶

The 'planned attack' presented by Ledeboer and her team received sympathetic and extensive coverage in both the national and architectural press, the most any of the exhibitions appears to have received. The response of a correspondent of *The Times* may serve as typical: 'Several qualities make the NHFO exhibit...the most interesting thing at Olympia; but two in particular give it importance at the present moment. First, it is itself planned, it is a whole made up of selected and arranged parts...And next the NHFO shows clearly that the housing problem does not include building only'.⁵⁷

Such a response suggests that Denby had been wise to ally herself with a body which could gain approval from a conservative newspaper. Indeed, there was much that was positive about the 1934 exhibition for her. Its approach to housing reiterated much of what Denby had written up to this date, and her section of the exhibition had allowed her to promote her new career. At the same time, the 1934 exhibition can also be seen as marking the moment when the voluntary sector began the process of shedding many of its old practices in order to present itself as a body worthy to advise central government. Several important innovations had taken place. An architect had been given responsibility for the exhibition. Under her direction lady volunteers were marginalised from the exhibitions and were replaced by full-time workers (paid and unpaid) from within the voluntary sector who could be presented as experts in the

⁵⁶ Housing Centre (1934), p.14.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 13.9.34 - clipping in HCT Archive.

social side of housing. In addition, experts from outside the sector were recruited. Denby's role at NHFO 1934 reflects this. Her expertise was directed to a particular task; she had become an 'employee' of the committee, no longer enjoying the control she had once had. Gradually the contribution of the individual was downplayed and a more collective form of expertise presented, signalled in 1934 by the MARS Group description of itself as a group of architects and technicians with no names listed. By 1936, when the fifth NHFO exhibition was held, such processes had reached their full expression.

NEW HOMES FOR OLD, 1936

At NHFO 1936 the whole exhibition, both in its organisation and its message, emphasised the role that organisations and planning should play in the ongoing reconstruction programme. Though a number of individuals contributed to the display, the final show was presented as having been arranged by the Housing Centre in collaboration with the MARS Group and a new contributor, the Architects and Technicians Organisation (ATO). In the accompanying catalogue the texts which complemented each display were not authored as they had been previously [5.3], and were presented not as essays but as a series of headline statements, with statistics and reference to the appropriate bodies which the visitor could contact to find out more [5.4].⁵⁸ Henceforth the individual worker was subsumed into the collective professional organisation.

⁵⁸ Of the groups listed, the Housing Centre is mentioned in every section. MARS is not mentioned at all, whilst ATO is featured under 'Manhood - the Town'. Other groups cited included the Town Planning Institute, PEP, the RIBA and the Nursery School Association.

In order to put this idea across most effectively the exhibition was, for the first time, given a theme rather than being an exposé of slum conditions and the techniques to replace them. The starting point for the display was the observation that despite the construction of three million houses since 1915 '...the setting for each stage of life is far from satisfactory'.⁵⁹ This provided the theme of the exhibition, the Ages of Man, from infancy to old age and the different architectural, social and planning needs to which each gave rise and for which solutions were needed. The organisers argued that by '...utilising the technical skill and knowledge which is now available [a] fitting background can be provided to every stage of life'.⁶⁰

Though evidence is limited, it seems that Judith Ledebor again took responsibility for the coordination of the exhibition (something which, this time, was not stated in the catalogue).⁶¹ There were five sections in all, 'Infancy', 'Childhood', 'Manhood - the home', 'Manhood - the town', and 'Old Age'. To each section Ledebor assigned a sub-committee which had powers to co-opt relevant experts to assist in its research. Her team of workers was drawn from the Housing Centre, herself, Eugen Kauffmann and Jocelyn Abram; from the MARS Group, it was as a member of this group that Denby worked on NHFO this time; and the ATO, ^{in addition} for the first time someone was appointed to coordinate the design of the whole exhibition. ^{The post went to the architect and exhibition designer} Misha Black, a further example of the application of expert skills to a particular problem.

⁵⁹ Housing Centre (1936), 427.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Of all the exhibitions, there is the least material to document 1936. This may reflect the fact that the Centre was now fully in control of NHFO. Since its archives are incomplete, it means that it is hard to construct a clear picture of the exhibition's organisation.

As far as can be worked out, contributors worked on the exhibition during the spring and summer of 1936. Fry headed the team which dealt with 'Infancy'; Godfrey Samuel (of MARS), 'Old Age', whilst ATO was given 'Manhood' in conjunction with Eugen Kaufmann and Jocelyn Abram. Lady Allen of Hurtwood was quickly recruited to help with the sections on 'Infancy' and 'Childhood', whilst Olive Matthews, who had written on the problem of housing the elderly, assisted with 'Old Age'.⁶² The catalogue was produced by a committee which included Denby, Bobby Carter, the librarian of the RIBA and a member of ATO, and Ledeboer.⁶³

The presence of ATO at NHFO 1936 represents the second occasion on which a group of architects used the exhibition as a way to promote its ideas and enter the housing debate. ATO had been formed in February 1935 by Francis Skinner and Berthold Lubetkin in reaction to what they perceived as the apolitical nature of the MARS Group, to which the latter belonged. Although ATO would carry out research its members were more interested in fighting for the rights of salaried architects and technicians, for better housing for everyone, especially the working classes; and for the rights of tenants and house buyers.⁶⁴

Although ATO's willingness to take a politically-active stance distinguishes it from MARS, the motivations for this kind of engagement were similar to those which had led to the formation of MARS and its collaboration with the NHFO group. A review of ATO work, probably written in late 1936, recorded that it was 'formed by a number of architects,

⁶² Minutes of meeting, 10.6.36, SaG/88/4. See Matthews (1935).

⁶³ 'Discussion of Organisation' SaG/88/4.

⁶⁴ See ATO Memorandum, 11 February 1935, SaG/89/3. Godfrey's papers are the main source of information about ATO. See also Coe & Reading (1981) and Allan (1992).

engineers and surveyors, who were deeply dissatisfied with the lack of realism in the architectural profession...and after considerable unemployment among architects had caused them to stake stock of their position'.⁶⁵ Another document stated: 'They [architects] feel that, today, when the need for a skilled solution of housing and town planning problems is becoming more and more urgent, the architect is finding himself completely unable to assume his proper social responsibility'.⁶⁶ By April 1936 ATO had produced its own magazine, the *ATO Bulletin*, and organised 'An Exhibition on Working Class Housing by the ATO' at the Housing Centre. The invitation to participate in NHFO 1936 seems to have come in response to that exhibition.⁶⁷

The visitor to the exhibition produced by the Centre, MARS and ATO, followed a route which plotted the course of human life in each section. As before the culmination of the display was a model flat, this time designed for the elderly. Data was displayed on the walls, models were also used, with guides on hand to provide extra information; the catalogue was a further aid [5.5].

That the exhibition represented a new phase in the work of the Housing Centre did not go unremarked by its reviewers. The correspondent of the *Architect and Building News* observed, '...this year the show is of a much more progressive character, from the earlier moral of our need of new homes, we come to illustrations of new homes that might be better and new cities that should be planned'.⁶⁸ He also noted the changes to the

⁶⁵ ATO Review of Work, c.late 1936, SaG/90/1.

⁶⁶ ATO Memorandum, 11 February 1935, SaG/89/3.

⁶⁷ ATO Review of Work, c.late 1936, SaG/90/1.

⁶⁸ *ABN* (1936a), 392.

presentation of the show '[the exhibition is] logically and strikingly planned'.⁶⁹ Others noted: 'So well defined is the point of view of these critics that some of their judgements appear altogether too doctrinaire in a world where architecture is still in a state of wild stylistic and technical confusion'.⁷⁰ There was at least one voice of significant support, the King. On his visit to the show he commented to Denby 'I hope that this exhibition will rouse the people'.⁷¹

NHFO 1936 stands as the epitome of the way the voluntary sector had reorganised itself between 1933 and 1936. The Housing Centre promoted a process in which anonymous experts worked with allies and consultants in a coordinated attack on a particular problem. This time there was no sign of lady volunteers whilst Denby's participation in this exhibition was, significantly, not in her own right but in her capacity as a member of MARS; signalling her own marginalisation from the Centre's activities, a hint of how contingent her role would become.

In the short term, however, collaboration with the Centre gave Denby credibility and legitimacy for the practice of housing consultancy; a source of support, and a platform for self-promotion. It seems to have worked. Between 1933 and 1939 Denby was continuously employed which suggests that her skills were sufficiently sought after to allow her to make herself a space in the housing world. In the long term, however, no figure like her, nor she herself was able to continue the practice of independent housing consultant. Once again, she would have to undergo a metamorphosis.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 378.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

⁷¹ *Daily Herald*, 18 September, 1936 - clipping in HCT Archive.

MAKING FRIENDS

Such alliances were not just a means through which Denby could join spheres of influence and create work for herself; they also brought her support and friendship. The new friends she made in the 1930s were mostly architects, adding to her political friends from the ILP and her contacts in high society, Mrs Sassoon and the Prince of Wales.

From her work on the NHFO exhibitions Denby gained a number of women friends to add to her existing friendships with Marjory Allen and Margaret Lloyd. Many of these were young architects at the beginnings of their careers whom she would try and help. Janet Pott, who worked on the early NHFO shows, recalled that she was 'very fond' of Denby, and that they would go looking at housing together in Pott's car.⁷² Denby repaid the favour by commissioning Pott and her partner Sheperd to design work not just for the NHFO exhibitions but also securing for them the job of designing the First Feathers Club in North Kensington.⁷³ Others who would benefit from her interest included Mary Crowley (now Medd), a young graduate of the AA, who met Denby probably during 1933. Denby nominated her for membership of the MARS Group (along with Justin Blanco White) and may also have employed her in the running of Kensal House.⁷⁴ Denby also became good friends with Judith Ledeboer through the NHFO connection.⁷⁵

⁷² Pott (1995).

⁷³ On the Feathers Clubs, see chapter 7.

⁷⁴ Minutes of MARS meetings, 23.11.36 and 2.6.37, SaG/90/3.

⁷⁵ Baker (1996).

Medd's description of Denby 'as someone with great warmth, affection and generosity who cared passionately about things and people' typifies the feelings aroused in Denby by those who were her friends.⁷⁶ Marjory Allen's comment that, 'Elizabeth's downright north country ways did not suit everyone, but we all loved her'; conveys a similar sentiment whilst at the same time recognising that Denby's character could alienate as many people as she attracted.⁷⁷ Friendship, for such a mercurial character, was vital since it provided support and shelter from the enemies her temperament created.

Through her meeting with Fry she gained access to and subsequently membership of the MARS Group which, a fellow member recalled, gave her great pleasure.⁷⁸ Denby's first main contact with the Group came with the invitation for it to participate in the NHFO exhibition of 1934. In January 1935 she was nominated for membership by Wells Coates, a proposal seconded by Basil Ward. MARS had three categories of membership and initially she was put down for category 'B', for non-professional adherents to the ideals of professional members.⁷⁹ By the time of her election, on February 25th 1935, she had been moved to 'A', 'architects, engineers, town planners, allied technicians and experts able to present proof of their adherence to the principles of the group'.⁸⁰ A change which, perhaps, represented the recognition by her peers of her expertise. Quite why it was Coates who nominated her is not clear. Given Fry and

⁷⁶ Correspondence with Mary Medd, Sept.1995.

⁷⁷ Allen & Nicholson (1973), 115.

⁷⁸ Bobby Carter's obituary of Denby in *The Times*, see Carter (1965). Although the obituary was not signed, his drafts of the text have survived and are now with his papers in the BAL, ref.CaE/2/1.

⁷⁹ Categories cited by Campbell (1985), 70. Denby remained a member until 1953.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Denby's relationship it might have been expected that he would have proposed her; perhaps he feared an accusation of favouritism if he did. It may be that Coates' promotion of Denby was a way of thanking her for two commissions she had secured for him: the design of the Second Feathers Club and a school camp for the National Council of Social Service in Ogmore, South Wales.

There is no direct evidence to suggest that Denby played a major role in the MARS Group although she was active enough a member to serve on the Central Executive Committee between 1936 and 1938, and for meetings to be held in her flat at Princes Street, Hanover Square. Her chief activity seem to have been to act as liaison on the NHFO exhibitions; a further reason, perhaps, for her election. Though she is listed as a contributor to the MARS Group exhibition of 1938,⁸¹ and as a worker on the MARS plan for London,⁸² the evidence does not support her playing a major role in either project, though she provided trade contacts and material on Kensal House for the exhibition.⁸³

On balance, it seems that membership of the MARS Group enabled Denby to enact the role of the modern woman which she had invented on her move to London, as well as granting her further legitimisation as a member of London's intelligentsia. It also gave her access to the company of men on equal terms. She was often the only woman present at Group meetings, a situation it can reasonably be assumed she enjoyed (Carter's observation seems to underline this). Her position as a sole female

⁸¹ See MARS (1938).

⁸² See Fry (1944), 86.

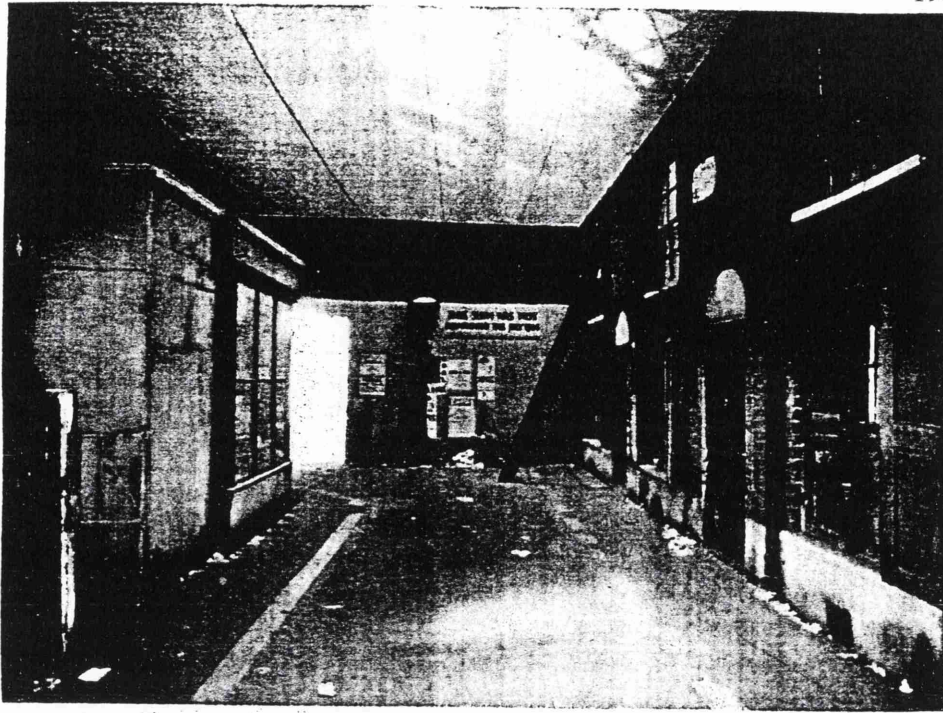
⁸³ Meeting minutes, ArO/2/6/1.

amongst men suggests that her gender was not seen as a problem by her male colleagues. That she was a housing consultant rather than an architect may have helped her in this respect. Although she seems to have included design in her definition of consultancy, others could perceive her as part of the tradition of housing expertise which women had been encouraged to take since the war, making her less of a threat to what was a predominantly male profession.

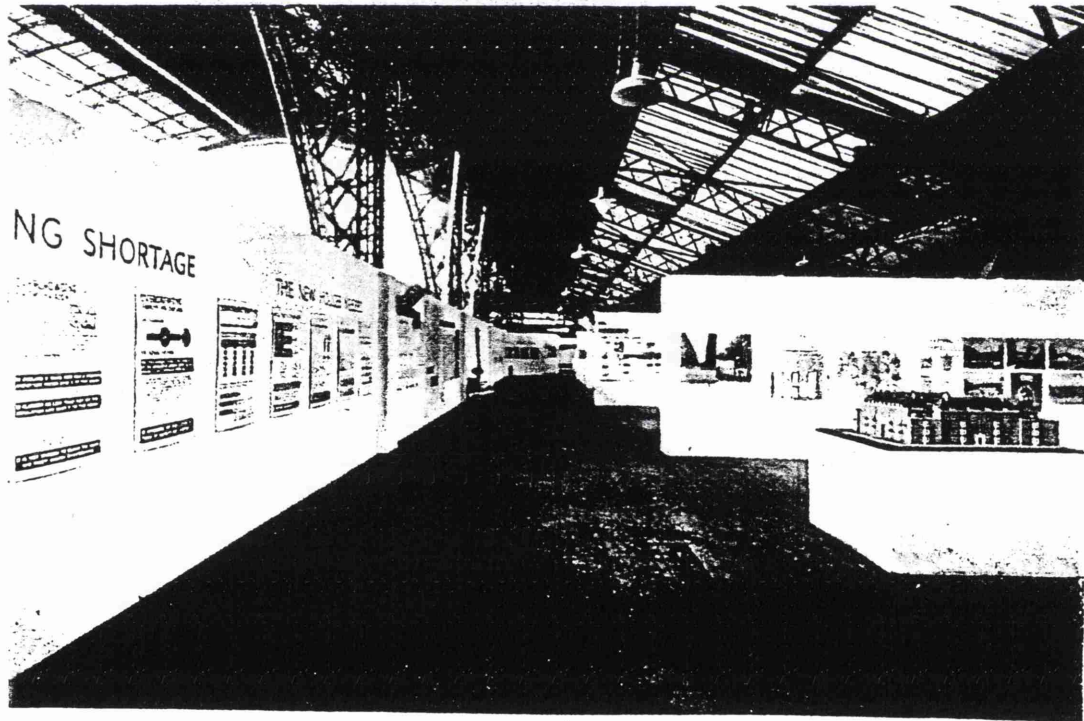
Participation in the MARS group also gave Denby the chance to work alongside her lover and main collaborator at this time, Max Fry. By his account the pair formed an intense relationship in which they were able to share a passion for one another with a passion for their work: 'our temperaments interlocked...[and] we fell into no ordinary kind of loving'.⁸⁴ Although the exact nature of this fierce and passionate collaboration will probably never be known, it did produce two significant projects, R.E.Sassoon House and Kensal House.⁸⁵ And it is to a discussion of these that my focus now turns.

⁸⁴ Fry (1975), 142.

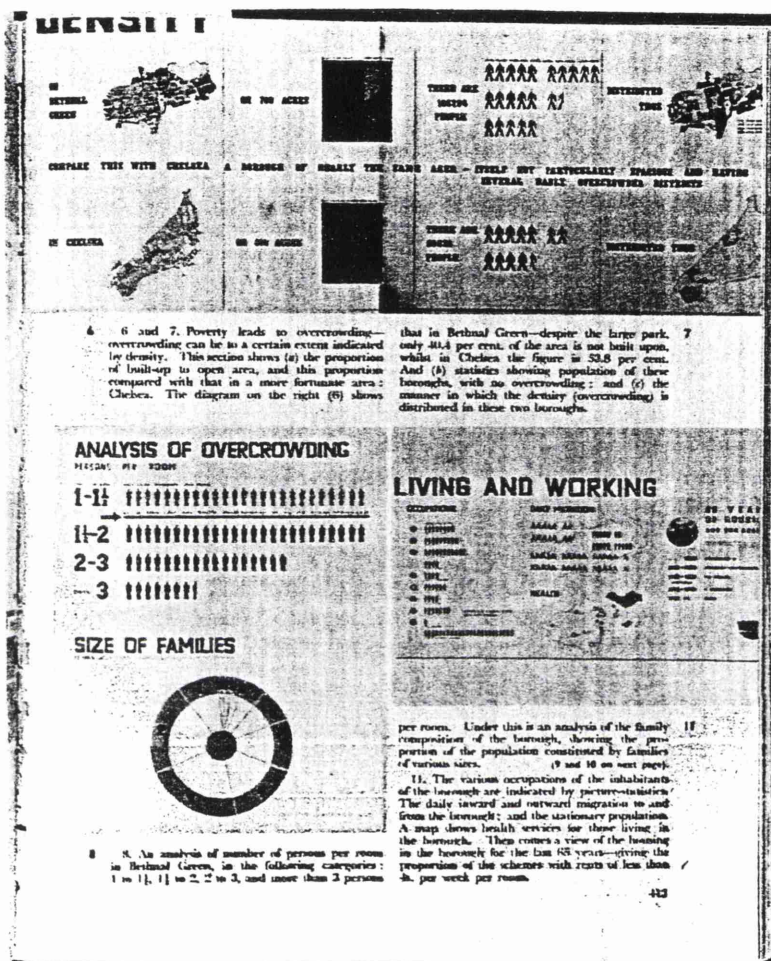
⁸⁵ Fry (1965).



Susannah Row, Drysdale Street Clearance Area, as reproduced at Olympia



5.1: NHFO 1934: Slum Alley and General View of Exhibition

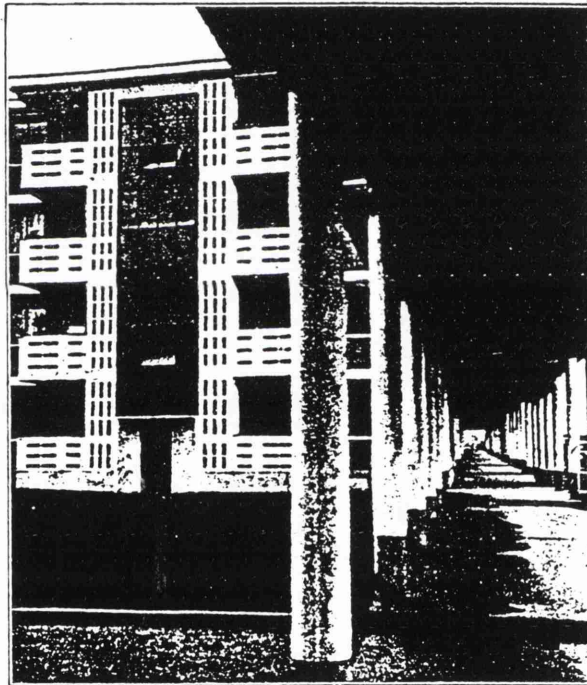


Foreign methods and schemes on a large scale, which give a lead to necessary planning activities and indicate the advantages to the general community are to be found. The outstanding point it is intended to convey is that rehousing without planning may do more harm in the end than temporary good.

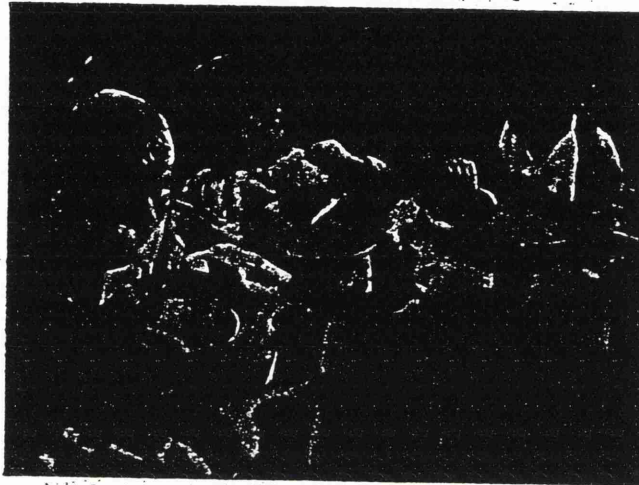
SECTION VI. PLANNING AND EQUIPMENT.

ARRANGED BY MISS ELIZABETH DENBY.

It is possible that a quarter of the population of Great Britain will be rehoused during the next twenty years. If real value is to be obtained from this vast proposed expenditure, the planning and equipment of low-rented dwellings in relation to the



A Housing Scheme at Bayneux, outside Paris, showing covered colonnade, connecting the blocks of flats, and leading to a swimming pool, the staircase window, the private balconies, and the balconies (with vertical perforated ventilation holes), for drying clothes.



INFANCY.

17.3% of the children who enter elementary schools at 5 years of age are found to be physically defective.

The working mother must be relieved of some of her work.

Through Infant Welfare Centres

Through Nursery Schools

It is known that these defects can be prevented in the pre-school years. They arise mainly as a result of poverty, malnutrition and bad surroundings.

She bears, nurses and trains her children. She shops, cooks and washes for her family. She may be a wage earner as well as a wife.

She must have help and guidance in her work.

Only 50% of the child population were served by Infant Welfare Centres in 1934. Every mother should have access to modern medical knowledge and care.

There is hardly any public service available for the child from the ages of 2-5. Every mother should be able to bring her child to a nursery school. In 1935 there were only 80 nursery schools in England and Wales.

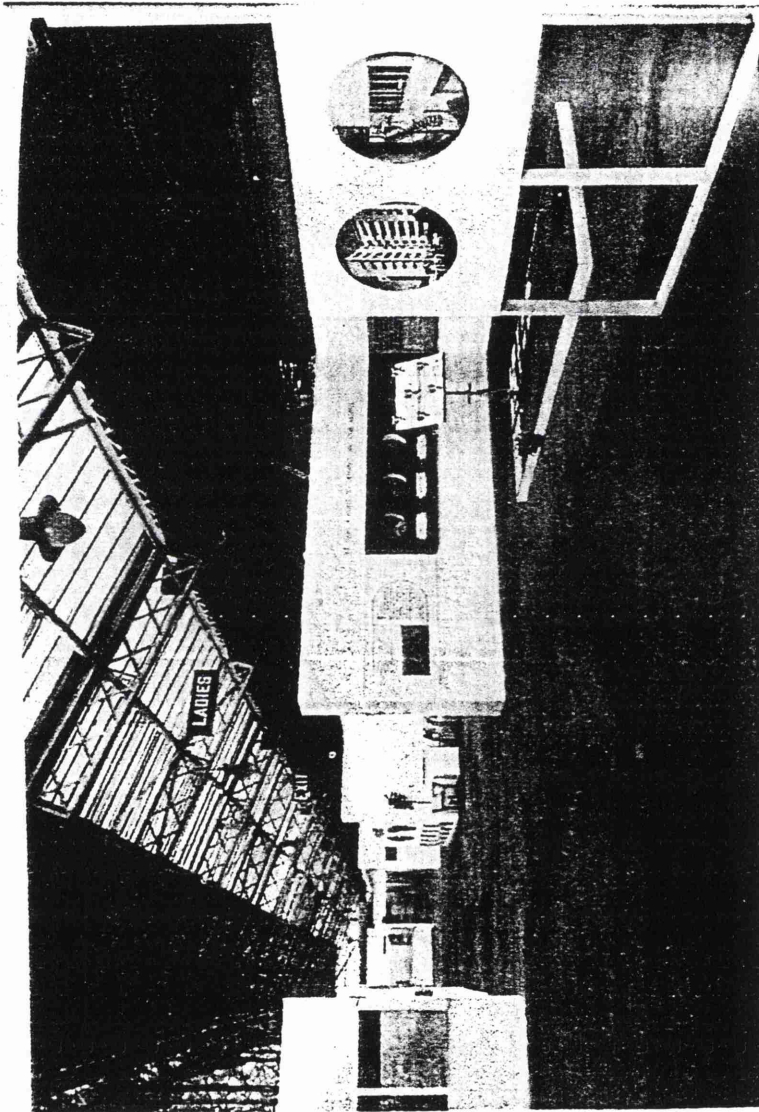
We recommend that nursery schools fitted and equipped to serve the physical, moral and intellectual requirements of children shall be available to all those from the ages of 2-7.

Further information can be obtained from:-
The Housing Centre, 13, Suffolk Street, S.W.1.

The Nursery School Association of Great Britain,
29, Tavistock Square, W.C.2.

The Ten Year Plan for Children, 4, St. James' Square, S.W.1.

The National Council for Maternity and Child Welfare, 117, Piccadilly, W.1.



5.5: NHFO 1936: General View of Exhibition

CHAPTER SIX

REHOUSING SLUM DWELLERS: STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW HOME

part one: the modern flat: R.E.Sassoon House

In her writings of the early 1930s and through her work with the NHFO exhibitions, Denby had outlined her theory of the form new housing for former slum dwellers should take. Between 1933 and 1939 she had three opportunities to translate these ideas into built form: R.E.Sassoon House and Kensal House which were opened in November 1934 and March 1937 respectively, and the All-Europe House, the idea for which was first outlined in November 1936 and then realised as a prototype for the Ideal Home Exhibition of Spring 1939. Common to all these projects was Denby's desire to regenerate both the built environment and its inhabitants. Her method of achieving this, however, did not remain fixed and it is the concern of this and the following chapters to explore how and for what reasons her approach to housing design evolved in this decade.

R.E.SASSOON HOUSE: finding a site

By the time Denby resigned from the KHT in early October 1933 she, Mozelle Sassoon and Max Fry had been working on what would become Sassoon House for several months. The finance for construction had been secured and Fry and Denby had produced a set of plans. There remained, however, one major obstacle to further progress: they had no site. Mrs Sassoon was prepared to pay only for the cost of building. For the scheme to go ahead they needed, somehow, to secure a gift of land. It was this problem which led Denby and Sassoon to enter into partnership with the

people responsible for one of the strangest social welfare schemes of the inter-war decades, the Pioneer Health Centre (PHC).

The PHC, or Peckham Experiment as it was also known, was initiated by two doctors and biologists, Innes Pearse and George Scott Williamson in 1926. Through the establishment of a medical-cum-leisure centre, the doctors set out to investigate the actual state of health of working-class communities and from this basis develop techniques which would improve it. The initial experiment, which lasted between 1926 and 1929 convinced the doctors that more work needed to be carried out. Thus a second Experiment took place between 1935 and 1939 in a purpose-built centre designed by Owen Williams and it was during the process of preparing for this that the doctors became interested in incorporating a housing scheme into their investigation.¹

On 26th October, 1933, Mrs Sassoon approached the Executive Committee of the PHC with a request for a site on which to build 'sixteen working men's flats'. The Committee owned two acres of land on St.Mary's Road, Peckham, south London, on which it was planning to erect its new building and it was agreed at this meeting that a portion of this site could be handed over to Mrs Sassoon. There was one condition: that the block would be administered by a Trust on which the Centre would be

¹ The scheme was finally wound up in 1950. For a contemporary account of the PHC's work see Pearse & Scott Williamson (1931), (1938) and Pearse and Crocker (1943). I have used all three texts to assemble my account of the Centre's work. More recent work on the Centre's activities may be found in Lewis (1982) and Lewis and Brookes (1983).

represented.² A week later Sassoon formally accepted the offer and the Pioneer Housing Trust (PHT) was formed to oversee the scheme.³

Given the proximity of the Centre and the flats once built, it seems surprising that historians have subsequently failed to make a connection between the two projects, especially since Fry noted in his autobiography that the flats 'would be the first of a girdle of dwellings around the Peckham Health Centre'.⁴ That this was the intention is made evident in the objectives listed in the *Articles of Association* issued when the PHT was registered in June 1934. There were three: to acquire land on which to build or improve accommodation for the poorer classes at low rentals in Camberwell and elsewhere 'for the promotion of the health, decency and comfort of the persons so accommodated...'. Second, to establish or take over ante and post natal clinics for mothers and babies, and third:

by education, instruction and advice, nursing, medical and other assistance and otherwise, to promote the health and welfare of parents and families, to develop the sense of parental responsibility, to promote the comfort, health and happiness of families...⁵

The vision was - though it never came to fruition - that the PHC and Sassoon House should be the first steps towards a revolution in health and housing provision.

² Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Pioneer Health Centre (PHC), 26.10.33, held in the archive of the PHC at the WIHM/CMAC, SA/PHC. The site was occupied by seven houses, no's 1-13, St Mary's Road. Mrs Sassoon was given the site of no.13, it and all the other houses were demolished with the exception of no.9 which became the house where the PHC's staff lived.

³ *Ibid*, 2.11.33.

⁴ Fry (1975), 138.

⁵ Pioneer Housing Trust Ltd, *Articles of Association*, 1934, p.1. Copy amongst Denby papers: 11 62 35.

Why should such a collaboration have happened? For Denby and Sassoon the loss of a site in Kensington meant the obvious and primary attraction of partnership was the gift of land. But why should the PHC's Executive Committee have agreed to sign over part of its land, at no cost, to Denby and Sassoon? It would seem that the doctors felt the Experiment was incomplete without an investigation into the domestic environment. In Denby they found a collaborator and a scheme in sympathy with their ideas; partnership was to their mutual advantage since they occupied the same ideological territory.

The doctors were motivated to carry out their investigation into the state of working-class health by the same concerns about the quality of the race and the desire to enable the working classes to realise their potential as were Denby and the voluntary sector. Whilst the latter had focused on how to bring people to citizenship through improvements to their material and social environment, the doctors' concern was how to achieve this through improvements to workers' health, a state they defined as 'the physiological condition of an organism living in mutual synthesis with its environment'.⁶

For the doctors the possibility of the working classes achieving such a synthesis was in jeopardy because of the twin problems of modern urban life which had broken up traditional communities and environments; and the social welfare policies of successive governments which had placed too much effort on improving the lives of the unfit at the expense of developing the health of the fit. The result was a nation engulfed by 'C-

⁶ Pearse & Scott Williamson (1938), 19.

ness'; a population pervaded by 'disease and devitalisation'.⁷ This meant that not only were considerable numbers of the population unable to operate at their most productive, either as workers or as citizens, but if reforms were not made to urban life and medical welfare soon there were grave implications for the reproductive and racial health of the country. The real issue, the doctors wrote, was that 'we face two problems...to see that only the fit marry and beget, and that having married and begotten, they have an environment in which the achievement of potential is possible'.⁸ It was through the establishment of the Peckham Experiment that the doctors sought to deal with the problem. First they wanted to establish a way to assess the actual state of health of a sample of the population and then they sought to develop appropriate techniques through which people could be brought to (their definition of) health.

Their solution was 'a settlement, but one founded on medicine'.⁹ At 142 Queen's Road, Peckham, the doctors decided to set up a family club. For a subscription of sixpence a week member-families could come to the converted house and be entitled to the use of, *inter alia*, a nursery, social club, poor man's lawyer, laundry and dressmaking facilities. In return they agreed to submit to a 'periodic overhaul', an extremely thorough medical. From the data gathered in this examination the doctors would be able to establish the state of health in a carefully-selected area of London, a site which contained 'a moderately good artisan population, capable of benefiting from educational work'.¹⁰

⁷ Pearse & Scott Williamson (1931), 1.

⁸ The doctors cited by Godwin (1934), 189.

⁹ A.D.Lindsay, Master of Balliol College, in the preface of Pearse & Scott Williamson (1931), viii.

¹⁰ PHC *Annual Report*, 1926. SA/PHC.

The bringing together in one location of a health service and leisure facilities, what the doctors called 'instruments of health', was not simply a means through which the doctors could collect data about health but also a technique through which the doctors could combat the problem which they labelled 'devitalisation'; the less than complete state of health caused by industrialisation and urbanisation. Cut off from nature by town life, from a natural supply of food by industrialised production and packaging techniques and the sense of community inherent in village life, individuals, particularly women, had lost touch with their true nature and their real role in society which was to form the organic entity of the family. The doctors did not believe it was possible to go back to pre-industrial times but they did think it was possible to create a reformed environment within the urban context through which members would be enabled to achieve a state of mutual synthesis with their environment and thus attain health. A club whose focus for its members was a set of social facilities was, the doctors hoped, a means to begin the process of revitalising a sense of community which had been lost in urban life.¹¹

The device of a family club also solved another problem which modern urban life had caused for the promotion of health. Before mass urbanisation doctors had lived in the same areas as their patients and had thus been able to observe them as they went about their daily lives. They saw their clients in a state of ease as well as disease. Urbanisation had caused the separation of the classes. Doctors now dwelt in different areas from their patients which meant they only saw them once disease had

¹¹ The clearest statement of what was at times an extremely odd conceptualisation of and response to urban life is to be found in Pearse & Scott Williamson's 1931 text, *The Case for Action, a survey of everyday life under modern industrial conditions with special reference to the question of health*.

fully developed. This was a matter of great concern. Previously, constant neighbourly contact with their patients meant that doctors were able to observe subtle changes in health and thus could act to prevent them from becoming more serious; no longer seeing their patients on a daily basis through social contact, such preventative work was not possible. People were becoming more ill than they needed to. They were unable to operate at full strength and thus were devitalised.

The club was, then, an attempt to re-establish the beneficial gaze of the neighbourhood doctor. Had it only been a health centre, members would only come when they believed themselves to be ill. The establishment of what was, in effect, a social club with a medical practice on the side would attract people on a daily basis. This enabled Pearse and Scott Williamson to observe the members '...when operating unrestricted within [their] environment, unencumbered by illness'.¹²

This was, as A.D.Lindsay observed, a medical settlement. Once more members of the middle classes lived and worked alongside a working-class community. In a further echo of settlement practice the doctors also placed great emphasis on personal work and techniques to enable members to take responsibility for themselves: 'educational work, we consider, cannot be a matter of general propaganda; it must be a matter of personal and individual contact'.¹³ Improvement only had meaning, and permanence, if it was something which the individual initiated her or himself. Like their Idealist ancestors, the doctors believed in immanent potential, something which could be brought out from individuals by '...continuous

¹² *Ibid*, 5.

¹³ PHC *Annual Report*, 1926, 4. SA/PHC.

individual contact with a better example...the only sure and natural method of which we are aware of stirring the feeling, which alone is capable of giving the necessary urge to action'.¹⁴ This technique they gave the quasi-medical label of 'personal infection'.

Better example could take many forms. It could be moral: the example of other people's actions, hence the importance of individual contact or the gaze of the neighbourhood doctor; or it could be physical: the provision of amenities or an improved environment. Environment was a term the doctors used a great deal but in a much broader sense than is used today. For the doctors it was both a material and a corporeal landscape. The body (especially that of the mother) was just as much an environment as the club, the home or the town; all of it required attention and reform: 'the power of the environment may yet be potent enough to save the individual. If environment can be changed *early enough*, the child at least may be saved from the twin shackles of disease and devitalization'.¹⁵

Such ideas and techniques were implemented and refined during the first phase of the PHC. Over a three year period, the Centre had attracted 112 member-families. This fact proved to the doctors that there was a demand for such a club and was a major factor in their decision to launch a second and larger experiment. The other was that their investigations had revealed an alarming degree of disease and devitalisation. Of those who had joined the Centre only 9 per cent were without any form of 'disease,

¹⁴ Pearse & Scott Williamson (1931), 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

disorder or disability'.¹⁶ In 32 per cent 'disorder was accompanied by disease' and despite the fact that the remaining 59 per cent appeared in a state of 'well-being', this surface masked actual disorder.¹⁷ Such statistics had alarming implications for the future of the race and required further investigation. Between 1929 and 1933 the doctors and their supporters set about raising capital for a new, purpose-built Pioneer Health Centre.

The decision to build a new centre raised a further issue in the doctors' minds. Another lesson learnt during phase one of the Experiment was that although a centre could provide member-families with an environment rich in the instruments of health, on leaving it they returned to homes of a distinctly less improving nature. Most of their members, despite being relatively well-off, lived in one or two-room dwellings in overcrowded and subdivided houses.¹⁸ Pearse noted that 'if individuals after their "cure" remained in the environment in which they had been living...disorders were prone to recur'.¹⁹ All the hard work to improve health and social life was in danger. Was it possible to find a way to improve all the environments to which their member-families were exposed?

At some stage during 1932 and 1933, discussions took place amongst the Centre's Board of Management about the possibility of linking the new Centre with housing schemes in other boroughs. This does not appear to

¹⁶ Pearse & Crocker (1943), 12. The actual number of people comprising the 112 families is not documented.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 70.

¹⁹ Pearse (1945), 48-55.

have led to any results.²⁰ It was at this point that Mrs Sassoon made her request to the Committee; it must have seemed particularly propitious after the failure of the earlier negotiations. On its site at St.Mary's Road, it would now be able to build a totally reformed and reforming environment. In the Centre, members could be brought to health through the periodic overhaul and exposure to social and leisure facilities; in the flats the newly-healthy bodies could continue to flourish and grow. Hence, when the Centre's management agreed to give Sassoon the site the insistence that it should be represented on the PHT, the intention was that it should have a say in the selection of tenants.

Collaboration would clearly enable the PHC to bring the member-families into full mutual synthesis with their environment. What was its advantage for Denby and Sassoon? Was partnership merely a means to an end or did the two women share the ideals of the PHC? As far as can be inferred from their actions and, in Denby's case, her writing, expediency was not their sole motivation.

Mozelle Sassoon had been a subscriber to the PHC since its inception. It seems reasonable to assume that she was sympathetic to the doctors' aims and would have wished to see them extended in any way possible whilst securing land on which to build the memorial to her son.²¹ For Denby the collaboration had a great deal in its favour. In her writing and exhibition work she had placed great emphasis on the need for amenities alongside blocks of flats, something to which the tight budget for Sassoon House

²⁰ PHC *Annual Report* for 1932-33, SA/PHC.

²¹ Her name features on lists of subscribers in the Centre's *Annual Reports* from 1926. SA/PHC. No evidence survives of Mrs Sassoon's own thoughts about the Centre.

could not extend. If, however, the flats shared a site with the new PHC, which would contain a swimming pool, gymnasium, cafeteria and social rooms, tenants would have access to considerable facilities at no extra cost. This meant that Denby's first housing scheme would be a much more complete demonstration of her housing theory than she could previously have hoped.

Collaboration also meant that Denby could demonstrate another role the housing consultant could take: the coordinator of specialisms to tackle social problems, a task she had practised as Chair of the NHFO exhibitions. In addition it allowed Denby to ally herself with another group of people who shared similar ideas about the way to best solve the major social issues of the day. The doctors' secretary recalled that they and Denby were good friends and shared 'an interest in the environmental influences on health..'.²² The doctors' definition of environment (and people) as both biological and social entities closely matched Denby's emphasis on the need to provide for both the material and social life of tenants. She also shared with them the desire to reform and regenerate the urban environment. The merger of an investigation into health with one into housing, in a broader context, further strengthened the development of an alternative model of social welfare with which Denby was involved through the Housing Centre. It was too good an opportunity to refuse.

²² Correspondence with Mary Langman, the doctors' secretary, November 1996. Contemporaries recall her active involvement in the scheme but are not specific about dates
 - Correspondence with Mary Medd, and Jack Donaldson (PHC's Board of Management) Feb.1995

R.E.SASSOON HOUSE: construction and completion

With the offer of the site secure Fry could now begin the process of applying for planning permission for the scheme.²³ It was granted by the London County Council and Camberwell Borough Council in February 1934.²⁴ Fry was required to make few amendments to his design. In order for the structure to be passed unaltered, however, his engineer Archibald Kirkwood Dodds had to apply for exemption from the regulations on reinforced concrete in the London Building Acts.²⁵ With this won, contracts were signed on March 7th 1934 and the building of Sassoon House was underway.

The commencement of construction led to a flurry of publicity work for the scheme. In April, the *Architects' Journal* carried in a special Housing Supplement a detailed analysis of the design and construction of Sassoon House.²⁶ In June, following the incorporation of the PHT, the local press was given details of the project. The *South London Press*, under the by-line "Luxury Flats for Slum Dwellers, Society Woman's £13,000 Peckham Scheme", reported that the flats 'are probably the most modern in Britain...'.²⁷ Five months later, R.E.Sassoon House was officially opened by Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India, on November 16th, 1934.²⁸

²³ At this date Fry was still working for the practice Adams, Thompson and Fry, so the project, though it was Fry's (and Denby's) alone, was always attributed to the firm in the contemporary press.

²⁴ Metropolitan Borough of Camberwell, Borough Minutes, January to March 1934.

²⁵ Southwark Borough Council, District Surveyor's Department, file 351 on Sassoon House has the correspondence. Exemptions were to allow 1" cover of concrete on the reinforcing bars in the frame's columns and to allow a certain tensile strength in the reinforcing bars.

²⁶ *AJ* (1934a), 611.

²⁷ *South London Press* (1934a), 2.

²⁸ *The Times* (1934b).

Sassoon House stands on a quarter-acre site on the corner of St.Mary's Road and Wellington Road, Peckham [6.1]. Fry's 1933 dream of a portal truss block of working-class flats was realised in its structure, a translation for which Fry acknowledged the skill of his engineer, Kirkwood Dodds [6.2].²⁹ The resulting five-storey block contained twenty flats with three three-roomed flats and one four-roomed per floor.³⁰ Access was from balconies cantilevered from the block's frame which were reached from the staircase tower which was lit by a curtain wall of plate glass and adorned with a vitrolite glass mural of a horse and rider by Hans Feibusch. Originally, a wall ran north between the tower and the perimeter wall to create a private yard for the tenants which contained pram and bike sheds, a bench and drying rails.³¹ The exterior walls were painted cream, yellow, cinnamon and grey, colours which toned with the mural.³² The windows and balcony doors were steel and painted bright blue, as were the front doors.

Each flat contained a large living room, 13 by 12 feet, a kitchen, bathroom and either two bedrooms (both just over 10 by 10 feet) or three, the third being smaller at 10 by 6 feet [6.3]. Although small, nearly 8 by 6 feet, the kitchen was planned to be an efficient and labour-saving work place. Along the wall adjacent to the bathroom, with which it was planned as a repeated unit, were lined a gas cooker, gas copper with draining board cover, a sink and further draining board. This arrangement allowed

²⁹ Fry (1975), 142.

³⁰ There is no evidence to explain at what point the 16 flats for which Mrs Sassoon first sought a site became 20.

³¹ The flats, which were sold to the then Camberwell Borough Council in 1967, were in a state of considerable disrepair by the early 1980s. In 1986 they were refurbished and the original plans altered completely.

³² *ABN* (1934), 240-44.

bathroom and kitchen to share plumbing and gas flues, thus minimising costs. The wall opposite held a larder and continuous work surface with shelves beneath. The whole room was lit by windows which looked onto the access balcony.

The kitchen opened into the living room, the main room in the flat. It was equipped with a built-in cupboard and a brightly-enamelled slow-burning coke stove. The room was lit by large south facing windows and a glazed door which led onto what was called a 'family' balcony, 11 by 4 feet, which spanned the exterior of the living room and the rear bedroom [6.4]. It contained a built-in flower box. All the rooms were distempered, 'in various colours'. These were not specified in press coverage, although it was noted that up to dado level the colours were in darker tones than above it.³³ The whole flat was powered by gas: cooking, hot water and lighting.

This was what Fry called 'the cosiest flat';³⁴ 'a perfect receptacle for close family life'.³⁵ In all respects Sassoon House was an English *existenz-minimum*, the first time such a planning technique had been used for social housing in this country. It was, then, strikingly different from anything then being built for a working-class clientele. LCC flats of a similar date show cumbersome and unsophisticated plans [6.5]. The only comparable scheme of the same date was Wells Coates' Isokon flats at Lawn Road but these were aimed at a very different market. What intentions lay behind Denby and Fry's decision to design Sassoon House

³³ *ABN*, (1934), 242.

³⁴ Fry (c.1975).

³⁵ Fry (1975), 142.

on such radical lines?

SASSOON HOUSE: liberating the housewife

As Fry's description of the flats as a perfect receptacle for family life suggests, the overriding aim in the design of Sassoon House was the creation of a decent and healthy family dwelling. The regeneration of the family unit had been one of the primary aims of the PHC; Denby had also stressed in her writing that flats should be planned as centres of happy family life. The partnership with the PHC was one way to engender this, but it was also manifested in the decision to deploy the *existenz-minimum* plan.

In the *AJ's* Housing Supplement of April 1934 the author, presumably Fry, described the task which Sassoon House had set its designers: 'Slum clearance presents us with two vital but opposing problems: how to increase the standard of accommodation and at the same time lower costs'.³⁶ Only by the use of methods 'long since adopted by industry to produce articles of standard use cheaply' could this goal be achieved. Thus, Fry said, the planning of the flats was 'a matter of rigorous standardisation, a working unit being thought out in great detail, and then repeated throughout the building'. The use of reinforced concrete was a vital element in bringing costs down; it allowed the simplification of both constructional elements and the elimination of ornament which 'replace[d] the elaborate handworked elements of normal building'. He concluded 'we must not allow ourselves to be stampeded into lowering the level of accommodation...rather, by adopting cheaper *methods* of

³⁶ *AJ* (1934a), 611. All subsequent quotations, until indicated otherwise, come from this article.

building we should set aside from the resultant economies sufficient to pay for better equipment and healthier and more commodious planning than was possible in the past'.

That the plan and form of Sassoon House was an articulation of such beliefs is clear, although the reduction of costs in this case was perhaps more to do with the fact that the site came free. Nevertheless, it did allow an extremely high quality of equipment, most notably in the kitchen, for very low rents of 9 shillings (two rooms) or 11 shillings (three rooms) per flat. The fact that Sassoon House was an attempt to design a building system that was both cheap to produce *and* to live in is significant for it ties the design not solely to attempts to promote modernist solutions to housing design (see chapter five) but also to contemporary debates about how to ease the work and improve the health of the working-class housewife.

These debates are summarised in Marjory Spring Rice's 1937 book *Working Class Wives* in which she published the results of her investigation into the health of working class women in north Kensington and elsewhere. Again, the motivations for this study stemmed from the same concerns about the nation's health which has been a constant theme in this thesis: 'The health and happiness of the working married woman are clearly of great importance in considering national health as a whole...on her depends very largely the success or otherwise of the greater part of our population'.³⁷

³⁷ Dame Janet Campbell, Chief Woman Medical Adviser to the Board of Education, in the preface to Spring Rice (1939/81), xiii.

The problem was that both her physical and mental health was in jeopardy from '...the long hours of monotonous unrelieved domestic drudgery needed to keep her home and surroundings wholesome...and the incessant struggle to stretch an inadequate income to its utmost limits.'³⁸ Spring Rice, and many other campaigners, argued that a whole host of reforms were required to solve this national problem and to enable women to participate fully in national life.

Any means through which poverty could be reduced were, then, of vital importance. In his description of Sassoon House Fry had noted 'high rented flats for poor people do nearly as much harm as good, and lead towards starvation'.³⁹ A design which enabled building costs and hence rents to be reduced would release money into the family budget not just for food, thus improving the family's physical health, but also 'for newspapers, entertainment and personal indulgence'; the mother should be enabled to have both for a 'spiritually and physically healthy life'.⁴⁰ This desire raised another problem faced by working-class women. The amount of time required to keep bad housing in any state approaching cleanliness as well as go out to work and raise a family left women with no time to themselves.

Hence reformers argued for better housing and insisted that it should be well-planned and well-equipped. It was widely agreed that whilst labour-saving plans and equipment had been used in the middle-class home for many years, 'the rationalisation of labour has passed over the working

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *AJ* (1934a), 611.

⁴⁰ Spring Rice (1939/81), 189.

mother'.⁴¹ Again, Sassoon House may be understood as an attempt to bring this rationalisation to those who needed it most. When Denby announced the flats to the *South London Press* in June 1934 she stressed that they '...were planned on the most up-to-date labour-saving lines'.⁴² The flat plans were simplified and standardised not simply to reduce costs but also to reduce the amount of housework necessary to keep it clean. The lack of dust-attracting mouldings, the use of hospital skirting-boards and built-in cupboards combined with the use of gas and coke fuels, made for a much cleaner flat in the first place and one which was much easier and quicker to clean. The well-planned kitchen, with everything within reach, hot and cold running water, also reduced drudgery. Labour-saving design had a serious social role to play. The reduction of labour, combined with the cheapness of the rent, would make for a healthier housewife. The freeing up of time would provide her with leisure time; to what end should this be put?

This was a question Denby herself posed when she read a paper at the Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management in the Home (COSMITH) in July 1935. She argued 'the ultimate aim of improvement in material things is perhaps to free the individual to take part in all the other sides of life - the life of the mind and of the spirit'.⁴³ What would such participation enhance? Here the words of the doyenne of Scientific Management, Christine Frederick may serve: '[the] mental and spiritual well-being which it is the homemaker's peculiar function to pour out to her family and community'.⁴⁴ In a British context such sentiments had

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 15.

⁴² *South London Press* (1934a), 2.

⁴³ Denby (1935a), 154.

⁴⁴ Frederick, (1920), 504.

particular resonance given contemporary debates about citizenship. How could society progress if half its members were too exhausted and too ill to participate in civic life?⁴⁵ The exposure of the housewife to better health and to leisure would, it was hoped, make her 'realize that she is a citizen as well as a housewife and that in the present state of world politics she owes a duty to her country and to the international community of nations in addition to that of bringing up a family'.⁴⁶

In all respects the design of Sassoon House was an attempt to facilitate the physical and mental health of families, especially that of housewives. The collaboration with the PHC enhanced this process. It provided the family with both the means to improve physically but also as a social and community centre would enable the members to feel part of a broader community than just the family. In all its aspects, family life would be revitalised.

SASSOON HOUSE: as signifier

There are other readings which can be added to this interpretation of the radical design of Sassoon House. Its use can also be placed within the principle of 'better example' which I have referred to in my discussion of the PHC. The concept, which stems ultimately from settlement theory, was that through exposure to an improved environment PHC members would be infected^{by the desire} to improve themselves. In the same way that the founders of settlements like Toynbee Hall had hoped that the refined

⁴⁵ Spring Rice's investigations, echoing those of the PHC's, revealed that of her sample of 1250 women, nearly two-thirds were in the categories of indifferent, bad or grave health. Spring Rice (1939/81), 28.

⁴⁶ Lady Ernest Simon, the rapporteur for the session of COSMITH at which Denby spoke. Sixth International Congress (1935), 155.

interior design of its buildings would inspire the working-class members to improve their own homes, we might see Denby and Fry working on a similar assumption, that the modern kitchens and light rooms of Sassoon House would infect the tenants with an advanced form of domesticity.

Another echo of settlement aesthetic theory may account for the striking modernity of the block. Purpose-built settlement buildings were invariably erected in styles very different from the buildings around them. Their style served to signify the settlement's presence and the alternative life the movement promoted. The modernism of Sassoon House may be seen as the 1930s' version of this theory; as could the design of Owen William's Pioneer Health Centre next door [6.6].

The symbolism of Sassoon House's plan and form also served another purpose. The suggestion here is that it is possible to view the design of Sassoon House (and subsequently Kensal House) as having been informed as much by Denby and Fry's need to signify their involvement in the projects by the deployment of particular devices of plan and style as their concern to best serve the poor. Each used the scheme to promote themselves and their careers.

In the same way that the MARS Group seized the opportunity to collaborate with NHFO in 1934 and 1936 in order to begin the process of infiltrating modernism into the world of the talkative intellectual, Fry's work with Denby may be seen as the means through which he was able to prove his credentials as a modernist. Until he met Denby in mid 1933, Fry's career was at something of a nadir, a slump occasioned largely by his

Pauline conversion to modernism some time around the turn of the decade when he had joined the Design and Industries Association.⁴⁷ An 'irksome partnership' in the firm of Adams, Thompson and Fry, had allowed him no opportunities to express his desire to go 'unmistakably modern'.⁴⁸ The commission for Sassoon House was Fry's first chance to demonstrate his understanding of modernist design principles and, with luck, attract the new commissions which would enable him to establish an independent practice. Fry's retrospective comment on the projects - 'and so I was launched' - and his subsequent career as one of the central figures in the promotion of modernism in inter-war and wartime Britain, signals what a crucial commission the flats were for him.⁴⁹

Sassoon House, like other projects by early modernists in London, should be understood as a piece of architectural polemic. Fry had imported the European style wholesale to Peckham in order to mark out his work from that of his less modern contemporaries. The block has echoes of Gropius' work at *Siemensstadt* in its appearance whilst for its plan Fry drew on the most up-to-date ideas about the redefinition of interior design which had been outlined by architects in Holland and Germany and publicised through the publications of CIAM [6.7/6.8]. It was by using such devices, radically different from the equivalent in English social housing, that Fry could draw attention to his involvement in the scheme. If the flats had taken the same plan and form as such projects, no one would have noticed them nor him.

⁴⁷ Fry (1975), ch.10.

⁴⁸ Simpson (1985), 176.

⁴⁹ Fry (1975), 138.

This practice provides further evidence about how Fry had set out with the aim of communicating only with like-minded professionals. It is interesting to note that the local and national press seem to have had no language with which to describe Sassoon House. *The Times* managed to note that they were standardised and 'light and cheerful' but could offer no further description.⁵⁰ The architectural press had no such problems. The *AJ's Astragal* recognised that 'Mr E. Maxwell Fry has certainly broken fresh ground [at Sassoon House]...'.⁵¹

If Sassoon House was Fry's initiation rite into modernism, it was also the means through which Denby could finally give a physical demonstration of what housing consultancy meant. The main way she achieved this was by making sure that features which she had advocated in her journalism and at the NHFO exhibitions were incorporated into the flats' design and that the design process itself was collaborative. The PHC's *Annual Report* for 1933-34 reported that Sassoon House was being built 'under the expert direction of Miss Elizabeth Denby'.⁵² Some sense of what this meant may be gained from an article written by Fry in 1937 in which he described how he and Denby worked together on Sassoon House. It was Denby's knowledge and insight into the needs of the working woman and her family, he said, that 'turned a workable sort of plan into an intimately practical flat, suited to the real needs of the tenants'. This led to a 'rise in the standard of accommodation and equipment'. He also noted how 'a rough idea for a balcony only reached its final form...through her

⁵⁰ *The Times* (1934a).

⁵¹ *Astragal* (1934), 726. It may even be that Fry was talking to himself. Allan (1969), 52, points out that in 'the middle years of the 1930s' Fry *was Astragal*.

⁵² PHC *Annual Report*, 1933-4, 5. SA/PHC.

knowledge of how poor people could live if they had a chance'.⁵³

As far as Fry was concerned, Denby's contribution was to make his ideas even better. His description certainly conveys a picture of two individuals with complementary knowledge honing a workable idea into something special. What is interesting about his account of the design process is the implication that the ideas were all his in the first place. This assertion highlights one of the difficulties for Denby when her consultancy involved design work. In the case of Sassoon House, ideas which Fry says Denby improved were all features she had advocated in her writing. There is such a correlation between her writings which stressed the need for balconies, a high standard of equipment, communal facilities, that it seems more likely that Fry improved Denby's ideas rather than the other way round. There is, of course, no way to prove this but the suggestion here is that she played a major part in conceptualising what the flats would be, even if she did not 'physically' carry out the process of design.

The matter of attribution would not be so important if the progress of this aspect of Denby's career did not depend on public acknowledgment of her contribution to the design of the flats. The problem was that since her ideas were manifested in architectural form, commentators assumed that it was Fry, or Adams, Thompson and Fry, who were their authors. How could Denby ensure that her work was acknowledged? This had to be an ongoing process, one which took place through the press and other media. It was initiated by having her name listed alongside that of Fry in articles which described the flats. *The Times* noted that the flats were designed 'by

⁵³ Fry (1937), 948. There were other motivations for writing this article which I shall discuss in chapter 7.

Messrs Adams, Thompson and Fry in collaboration with Miss E. Denby, whilst the *South London Press* described her as one of the designers.⁵⁴ *The Builder* and the *Architects Journal* both cited Denby as consultant, the *Architect and Building News* did not.⁵⁵ She then reinforced this through her subsequent writing: a letter to the *AJ* In January 1935 on sun decks for tenements, and her paper at the COSMITH conference in July of that year, for example.⁵⁶ The suggestion here is that it was Denby's hope and expectation that her audience would make the correlation between the form taken by the projects with which she was involved and her writing and other practices and recognise her contribution.

This problem would prove to be a central one in Denby's designing career. The matter of attribution would ultimately cause a breakdown in her relationship with Fry and the lack of clarity about what consultancy, then and now, meant resulted in the subsequent skewed attribution of design on projects for which she was equally, if not more, responsible than he. These were, however, concerns which were only nascent in autumn 1934. With Sassoon House nearing completion, the primary concern of the partnership behind it was to find tenants and initiate the second phase of the Peckham Experiment.

SASSOON HOUSE: in occupation

The management of R.E.Sassoon House was placed in the hands of the Pioneer Housing Trust which was run by an Executive Committee of five members. As it had stipulated, the PHC was represented by two members

⁵⁴ *The Times* (1934a) and *South London Press* (1934b).

⁵⁵ *B* (1934), 895, 896, 898; *AJ* (1934b), 826; *ABN* (1934).

⁵⁶ Denby (1935b).

of its Board of Management, George Scott Williamson and Jack Donaldson. It had been agreed at the meeting in October 1933 that Mrs Sassoon could have two places on the Committee, she chose herself and a Mrs Avice Blanaid Martin. Both parties agreed to elect the first chairman, a post for which Denby was duly chosen.⁵⁷

The composition of the Committee is mostly self explanatory, the only unknown member is Avice Martin and her identity is a matter for speculation. Louise Campbell describes her as a future tenant of Sassoon House but cites no source for this information.⁵⁸ Although no Martins are listed in the surviving rate book for Sassoon House, it is not inconceivable, in view of Denby's later practice, that she was an original tenant.⁵⁹ At Kensal House, Denby made a point of involving tenants in the day-to-day running of the Estate, whilst in the war years she recruited a working-class housewife (a tenant of Kensal House) onto the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee. Martin is listed in the *Articles* as a 'married woman' living at Sancroft Street, Kennington, south London. This area was then under redevelopment by the Duchy of Cornwall into model dwellings and it may have been that Avice Martin lived in a condemned tenement and was in need of new accommodation. Given the likelihood that Denby would have helped Sassoon to select their fellow committee member, it seems possible that through their friendship with the Prince of Wales whose land this was, they would have had access to a potential tenant base in an area of south London close to Peckham. Alternatively, since this area was also the object of much philanthropic

⁵⁷ PHT, *Articles of Association*, 14. It was at this date that Denby became officially involved with the PHC when she was elected to its Executive Committee.

⁵⁸ Campbell (1983), note 114, 351.

⁵⁹ Metropolitan Borough of Camberwell (1936), 102.

work, it may equally have been the case that Avice Martin was a lady visitor who lived amongst a working-class community whose experience in this respect would be useful for the Trust.

Denby seems to have used her position as chairman of the Trust to assume another role for the housing consultant: that of housing manager. She seems to have had considerable control over the selection of the tenants and the running of the flats. When the first announcement to the press was made about the scheme Denby declared 'We are going to select the tenants from those who are living in the very worst conditions in Peckham and Camberwell and who are unable to pay a higher rent'.⁶⁰ The Trust received 500 applications for the twenty flats, many from families with seven or eight children who had to be turned down. Denby was reported as saying that 'Finally, we chose young people with families', most came from the Peckham district.⁶¹ All the families had moved in by the first week of December, 1934.

In entering into partnership with Denby and Sassoon, the PHC had intended that the flats and the new centre would be complementary projects. How much this happened in practice is difficult to ascertain. According to Jack Donaldson, who served on both the PHT and PHC Boards of Management, Sassoon House 'was largely occupied by Peckham members'.⁶² A comparison of the names listed in the 1936 rates book for the flats with names of member-families which it has been possible to find by going through *Annual Reports* and other material has found no such

⁶⁰ *South London Press*, (1934a).

⁶¹ *South London Press*, (1934b).

⁶² Correspondence with Jack Donaldson, Feb.1995.

correlations.

There is only one piece of evidence to suggest otherwise. The doctors' secretary, Mary Langman, recalled the case of the Chapman family. David Chapman was an unemployed Welsh miner who had walked to London in search of a job. Once he had found work he was joined by his pregnant wife and young son but they could only afford to live in tenement housing which soon had an impact on Mrs Chapman's health. The family's plight was discovered by a social worker who arranged for them to move to Sassoon House and join the Centre. Langman observed, 'This was a case where the combination of decent housing with the unusual opportunities offered by the family club, made a dramatic difference to a whole family'.⁶³

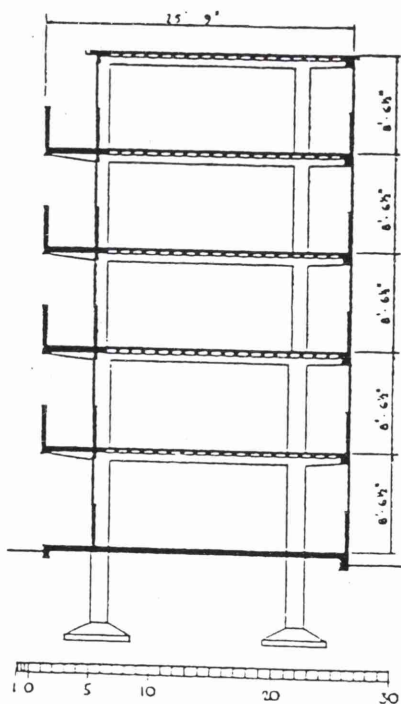
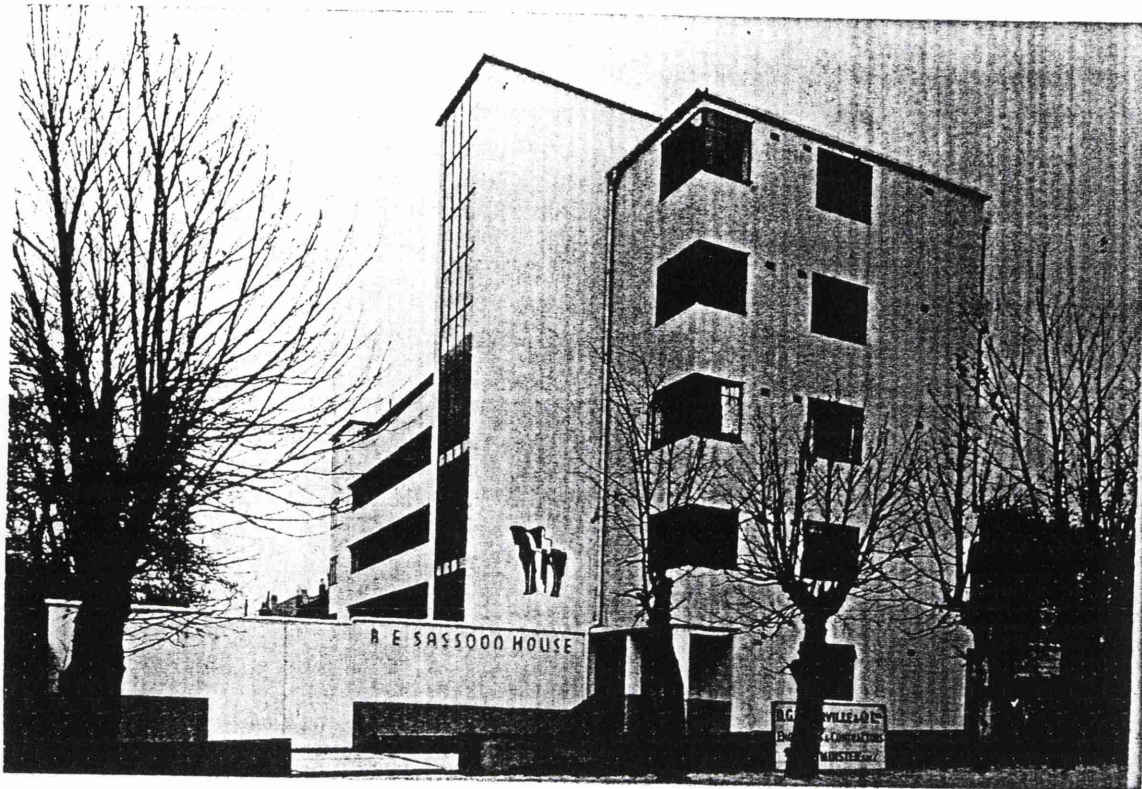
That Sassoon House did not turn out to be an incubator for the PHC is further confirmed by the minutes of the PHC's Executive Committee from April 1948. The Committee 'hoped that the PHT would consider shortly the close relationship of the PHC to this Trust, and that we should then have a greater say in the choice of tenants'.⁶⁴ It seems that Denby, though she had been happy to collaborate with the PHC to get a site for her flats, felt that it was only she who had the appropriate expertise to select tenants. It also gives a hint of the individualism in Denby's temperament which was antithetical to teamwork.

⁶³ Langman correspondence, November 1996. The rates book confirms that the Chapmans lived at 2, Sassoon House.

⁶⁴ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the PHC, 21.4.48. SA/PHC.

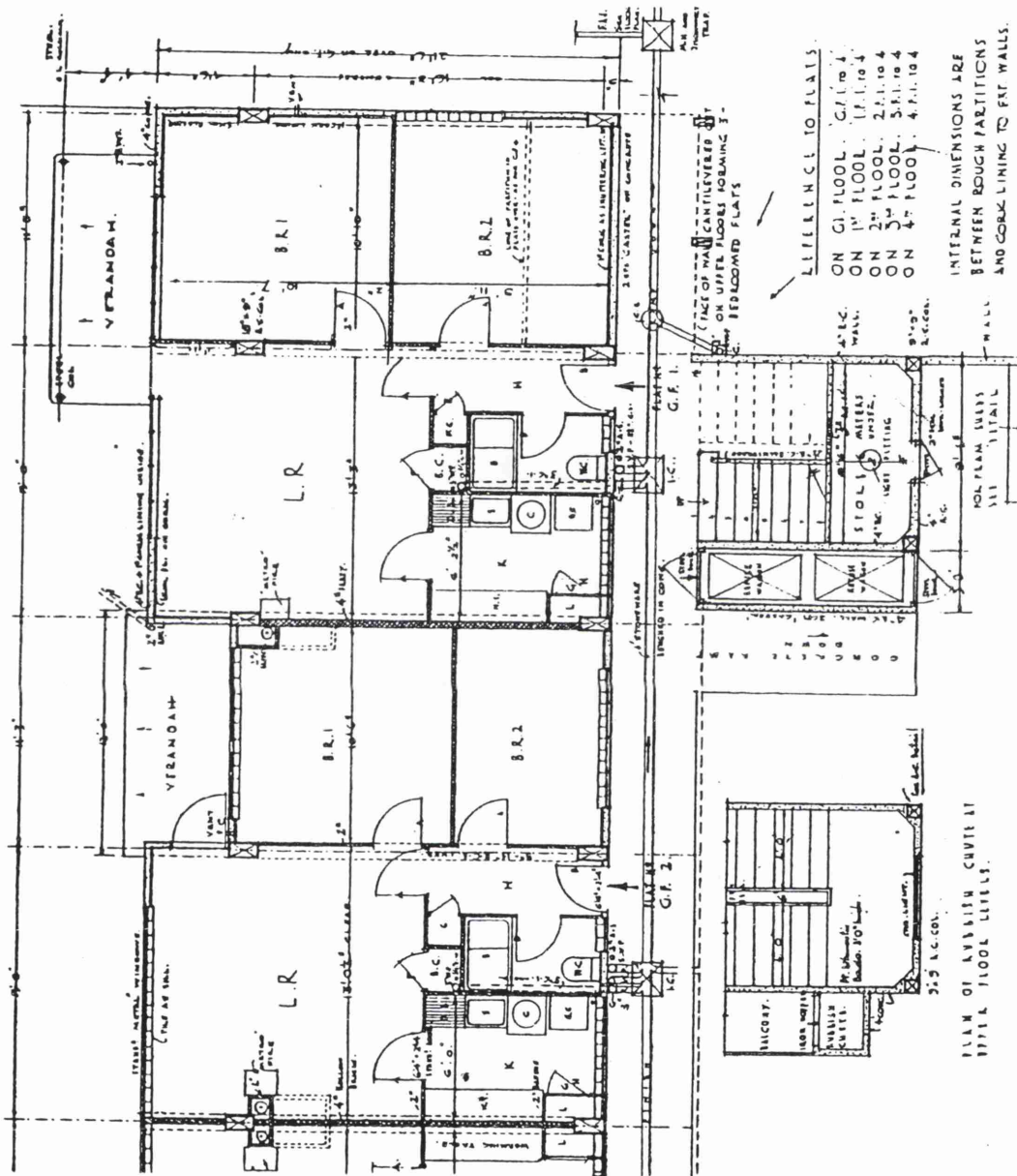
As far as the PHC was concerned, the collaboration with Denby, Sassoon and Fry did not ultimately turn out as it had hoped. For Denby *et al* it was a much more positive undertaking. Mrs Sassoon had built a permanent memorial to her son. Fry had made his debut as a modernist and received widespread coverage in the architectural press. He was now able to go into solo practice and legitimately assume a place at the forefront of the campaign to promote modernism in this country. Denby had expanded housing consultancy to include the design and management of a scheme of social housing.

On balance then, despite the initial problems in securing the site, Sassoon House had perhaps turned out to be a more complete realisation of Denby's theory of housing than she might have hoped. The block offered a technologically-advanced, labour-saving environment with amenities at close hand. It had also been a work born of collaboration, between her and Fry, and among her, Mrs Sassoon and the PHC. Yet, however complete a model of housing theory and practice it was, and however valuable the experience gained in enacting it, Sassoon House remained essentially an act of private philanthropy. What Denby and Fry needed was an opportunity to exercise their theories on a more public stage through a collaboration with individuals who had sufficient influence and access to sources of power to promote their ideas for wider adoption.



6.1: Sassoon House: View, Nov. 1934

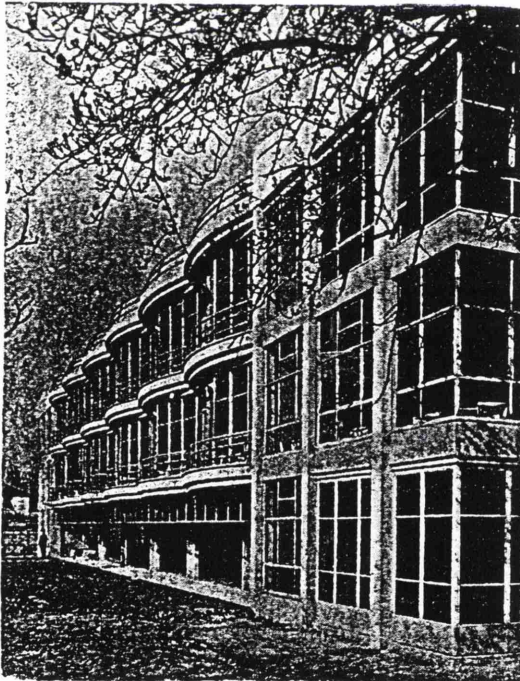
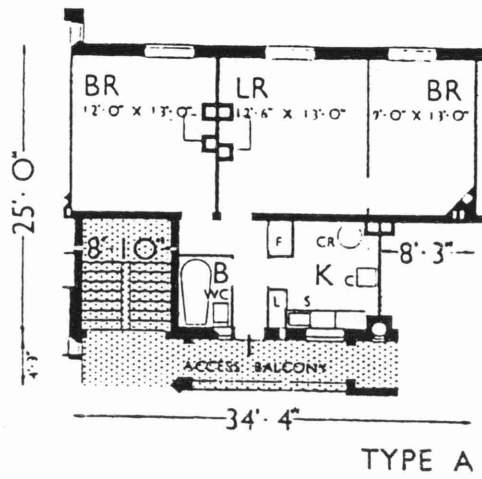
6.2: Sassoon House: Structure



6.3: Sassoon House: Plan of Ground Floor Flats

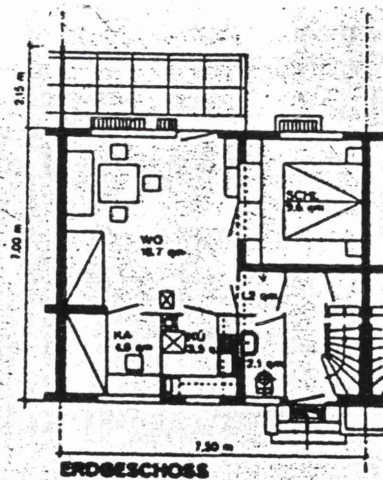
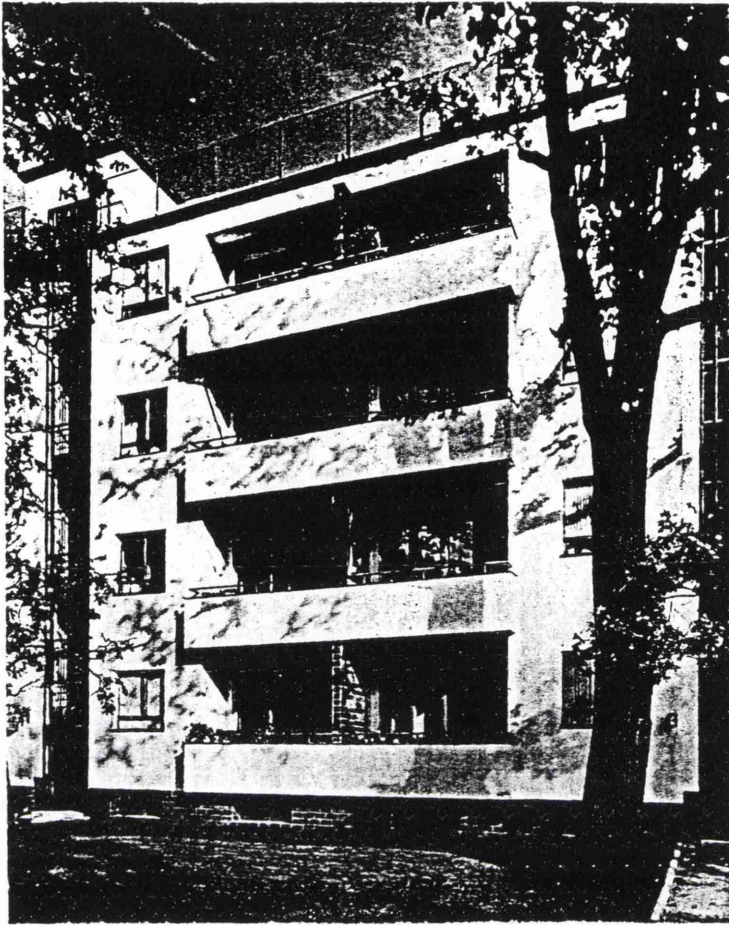


6.4: Sassoon House: 'Family' Balconies



6.5: LCC Flat Plans

6.6: The Pioneer Health Centre, Street Facade



6.7: Flats at Siemensstadt, Walter Gropius, 1929

6.8: Plan of House at Siedlung Westhausen, Frankfurt, Ernst May, 1923-1930

CHAPTER SEVEN

REHOUSING SLUM DWELLERS: STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW HOME

part two: the modern flat: Kensal House

The opportunity for Denby and Fry to exhibit their ideas on a wider platform came just after they had begun work on Sassoon House. In November 1933 Denby and Fry were appointed to a committee established to advise the Gas, Light and Coke Company (GLCC), one of the country's largest public utility companies and a major power supplier in London, '...on architectural and kindred matters of common interest'.¹ It was as a result of this appointment that the pair were commissioned to prepare designs for a block of working-class tenements. This would become Kensal House, the project which allowed Denby and Fry to realise the most complete expression of the ideas first tested at Sassoon House.

THE GAS, LIGHT AND COKE COMPANY AND KENSAL HOUSE

The GLCC's decision to commission Kensal House was a response to two inter-related challenges which the gas industry faced in the inter-war decades: the emergence of the electricity industry as a competitor and the announcement of a major programme of slum clearance by central government. The menace of electricity was not new in the 1920s. Before the First World War the GLCC had sought to combat the increased competition from that industry by employing the architect W.J.Tapper to improve the design of the company's displays and exhibition stands. It was also instrumental in the establishment of the British Commercial Gas

¹ Minutes of the Directors' Court of the Gas, Light and Coke Company, meeting held 3.11.33. Documents held at the London Metropolitan Archive (LMA). Ref: B/GLCC/54.

Association (BCGA) in 1912 as a joint-industry body which would promote the use of gas on a national basis.²

After the war, under the direction of a new Governor David Milne Watson, who warned that the growth of the electricity industry '...called for the greatest vigilance in the direction of policy', the GLCC continued and developed such policies.³ Milne Watson initiated improvements both to the engineering side of the company and its public image with Tapper now employed to remodel the company's showrooms and offices. The need for vigilance became acute when, in 1926, central government passed legislation to create a national grid operated by a Central Electricity Board.⁴ By 1934, most of England and Wales was covered by the grid.⁵ The gas industry might have been able to withstand this facilitation of electricity supply had it not been for the concomitant boom in the domestic house-building market and the announcement of major slum clearance programmes in the first five years of the 1930s. Gas companies now had to fight to ensure that new housing would be connected to the gas supply and that their products were desirable enough for consumers to choose them over the electrical alternative. In social housing this was a particular concern since many municipalities owned electricity supply companies and could prevent the use of gas in their clearance schemes.⁶

It was in this context that the scheme for Kensal House was born. Milne Watson and his new General Manager Robert Foot, who was appointed in

² See Everard (1949), upon which my account mostly relies, for a history of the GLCC.

³ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴ This was the Electricity (Supply) Act. Bowden & Offner (1996), 251.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Everard (1949), 347.

1929, took the decision to launch a concerted campaign to keep the market the company already had but also to try and increase it. This campaign would encompass the introduction of new cheaper gas rates, the development of a new mass-produced cooker aimed at the low-rental flat market and a significant increase in the company's public relations budget. To facilitate this, a Publicity Department was established in 1931. Later, under the direction of S.C.Leslie, the department would play a significant role in the promotion of Kensal House.

The GLCC initially chose to promote the new cheap tariff and re-designed products through extensive advertising and its salesmen taking the products to local authorities and other potential markets. Then the announcement in early 1933 of a mass attack on the slums by the Minister of Health, Hilton Young, made the Company realise that such techniques were not enough. If gas, rather than electricity, were to be the chief source of power for the dwellings built in the wake of the new slum clearance campaign, the GLCC needed to demonstrate the cheapness and efficacy of its services more directly.

It is not clear whether the company's Governor and Directors had already decided to commission a model estate to demonstrate the GLCC's products when, in November 1933, they set up the advisory committee to which they appointed Denby and Fry as members. Given the absence of full records of the Advisory Committee's work it is only possible to speculate

on its exact remit.⁷ The fact that the committee included two members well-versed in social housing would suggest that this may have been one of reasons that it was formed but, since the other members had little knowledge in this field, it seems likely that it was not the only one.

In all the committee had nine members. Three were representatives of the GLCC: Milne Watson, Robert Foot and S.C. Leslie. The rest were the advisers, described as 'Architects and others'. Denby was the 'other', Robert Atkinson, G. Grey Wornum, Fry, C.H. James and Michael Tapper (convener and secretary and son of W.J. Tapper), the architects.⁸ Each adviser would be paid 5 guineas per meeting.

The preponderance of architects on the committee suggests that one of the main reasons for its formation was to assemble a permanent team who could execute the company's on-going policy of re-designing showrooms and offices as a means to promote its public image. This was certainly how Fry recalled the committee's work, describing how each member received commissions on a rotational basis.⁹ Whilst this goes some way to explaining the choice of architects, it does not account for Denby's presence. She wrote that the committee was formed 'to consider the kind

⁷ At the time of writing, the only archival material relating to the GLCC exists at the LMA, comprising minutes of the Court of Directors' meetings. That there were minutes/files which documented the work of the Advisory Committee is apparent from references in these minutes. If these survive, they will be among the British Gas Archives which, following the privatisation of the industry, have been relocated and are now being recatalogued, the GLCC's papers last of all.

⁸ Minutes of the Directors' Court of the Gas, Light and Coke Company, meeting held 3.11.33: B/GLCC/54.

⁹ Fry (1975), 143. All the members designed buildings for the GLCC. C.H. James designed a showroom in Heston; Tapper did showrooms and offices; Wornum a shop at Leytonstone, Atkinson offices and showrooms at Edgware Road. (Source: BAL biography files). According to Allan (1969), 83, the architects were recruited on the recommendation of the RIBA.

of equipment most suited for working class homes' and that only subsequently was it decided to 'install the equipment in actual dwellings...'.¹⁰ If Denby's recollection is correct, then her membership makes a great deal of sense.

The inclusion of a woman on a committee which dealt with the design of domestic services would not have been unusual for this date. The company had already employed Mrs Darcy Braddell to write promotional leaflets and, in the early 1920s, established a team of women advisers to popularise gas cooking through demonstrations in shops.¹¹ What is less easy to explain is the selection of Denby. She seems an odd choice given that she had only just begun to make a name for herself, albeit by writing on kitchen design, in 1933. There seem two likely reasons for her appointment. She may have been recruited on Fry's recommendation, in return, perhaps, for the Sassoon House commission. This was something he implied in his autobiography. He wrote that Denby was allowed to join him on the design of Kensal House. This, however, would suggest her addition to an existing committee rather than her membership from the start as the evidence shows.¹² Alternatively, the GLCC may have already encountered Denby independently of Fry. The company was a major employer in north Kensington, the focus of the KHT's and KCSS' work. In the mid-1920s the company had donated its showroom windows in Kensington Church Street to the KHA for one of its election campaigns. It seems more than probable that Denby had been on friendly terms with the company's directors for some time and that her knowledge of social

¹⁰ Denby (1938a), 58.

¹¹ Barty King (1984), 202, mentions Braddell's *Around the Home with Gas*.

¹² Fry (1975), 143.

housing gained at the KHA/T would have been invaluable to the committee's work. A further possibility is that her work as a consultant for PEP on its investigation into housing drew her to the attention of S.C.Leslie who was an active member of that organisation.

Within a fortnight of the establishment of the committee, minutes record that the decision to build a block of demonstration flats had been taken. On 17th November, it was agreed that 'the Governor arrange for the erection of a block of working-class tenements for employees of the Company and others, either on the Pancras Gasholder site or on some other site to be settled by him and reported to the Court'. In January 1934 a section of the gasworks at Ladbroke Grove, Kensal Green was selected as the site and by February the Court had seen and approved in principle architect s sketch plans for the scheme.¹³

The minutes do not record how it was decided who the architect(s) for the scheme should be. When the estate was completed, it was always presented as the work of a 'committee of architects' with Fry sometimes cited as executant architect. In reality, the project was entirely Fry and Denby's. How they came to be awarded the commission is not clear. Fry gives a rather garbled account in his autobiography implying first that as the junior member of the committee he had to wait his turn for a job; a project which turned out to be Kensal House. He then contradicts this in his description of the holding of an internal competition for the commission: 'which I won by the trick of including the site of an old gasholder, not specified as available in my scheme'.¹⁴ The first account

¹³ Minutes of the Court of Directors, 17.11.33; 12.1.34; 9.2.34, LMA: B/GLCC/54.

¹⁴ Fry (1975), 143.

would accord with what seems to be the most likely explanation of events. That once the Governor had decided to commission the scheme for demonstration flats he realised that in Denby and Fry, who had just finalised the plans for Sassoon House, he had an ideal team to work on the project.

Having appointed Denby and Fry to the scheme, work could now begin on its design. The Directors' Court minutes record only that the commission was for a block of working-class tenements. No brief, if there ever was one, has survived. The only way that it has been possible to reconstruct the intentions the Governor had for the scheme has been by inference from what was finally built and from the promotional literature produced when Kensal House was opened. Such an analysis shows that what began as a technologically-driven project designed to promote the use of gas services very quickly became a scheme with a far broader remit. Kensal House was to be a technological and social experiment. The scheme would provide not just for the material needs of the tenants but also their social and community life.

The technological 'brief' to Denby and Fry was that the design of the flats should incorporate the 'complete modern automatic fuel service' which the GLCC had formulated for low-rental flats and which it hoped to see adopted by local authorities and housing associations.¹⁵ This had been developed in response to the premise that 'to re-house working-class people in fine new houses or flats with old-fashioned laborious kitchens and equipment...would be to offer them a new life with one hand and take

¹⁵ BCGA (1937), 2.

it away with another'.¹⁶ Thus the GLCC's system combined innovations in both the type of equipment provided for working-class flats and in the methods by which it was paid.¹⁷

The GLCC wanted to replace the living-room range, the traditional source of heating and cooking in the working-class dwelling, with equipment which was healthier and cheaper to use. A constant supply of hot water was essential 'at sink, copper and bath' but for a range to supply this required a constant fire, summer and winter. This was not just costly, but unhealthy because of the excessive heat generated in the living room, and dangerous since the housewife would need to haul pails of hot water from the range to sink or bath. The centralised provision of hot water was also dismissed as equally expensive, but also lacking individual control by the consumer. The GLCC advised that the 'the correct solution is a small instantaneous water heater in each flat serving both kitchen and bath'.¹⁸

A similar line of argument was used for cooking. Again a range was inappropriate. The coal used to power it 'dirties the skies and the kitchen'. Often tenants were provided with a range in the living room and a gas cooker in the scullery which made extra work and cost more. 'A modern automatic cooker' in the kitchen would 'save money and work...and set family life free from the sight and smell of cooking'. The living room could then be heated by a coke fire as and when necessary, and much more cleanly.¹⁹ By separating the functions of heating and cooking into different pieces of equipment and into different locations, the GLCC aimed to

¹⁶ *Co-partners Magazine*, (1937), 181.

¹⁷ The GLCC operated a two-for-one tariff which gave tenants 2d's worth of gas for 1d.

¹⁸ Capitol Housing Association (1937), 2-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

reduce dirt, work-load and running costs.

The language used in the GLCC's literature resonates of the arguments used in the campaigns for domestic reform and the improvement of the lot of the working woman I discussed in chapter six. It may be that the GLCC's Publicity Department used such language to soften the 'hard sell' but that is to judge the company a little too harshly. Of course, the company wanted to sell its products and services, but to do this it did not have to make Kensal House the remarkable experiment that it was. The project became not simply a means to demonstrate the efficacy of gas equipment but also the role of business as a social service^{and} the GLCC as a potential supplier of social housing.

The commission for Kensal House also offers a further example of the enactment of citizenship in the inter-war period, a theme to which I have often referred in this thesis. By commissioning Kensal House, the GLCC had recognised '...the community's responsibility towards all its members...and for providing the conditions of decent home and family life'.²⁰ Furthermore, in true Idealist fashion, this act of citizenship would in turn, as I shall show, enable those who had not yet achieve its status, the future tenants of the estate, to reach it.

Such sentiments resulted in the second half of the company's brief to Denby and Fry. The flats should be 'an enlightened contribution to rehousing in a broader sense',²¹ and a solution to '...the problem of

²⁰ Leslie, Head of the GLCC's Publicity Department, (1937a), 3.

²¹ *The Times*, (1937).

providing the right living conditions for re-housed slum dwellers'.²² Although the 1937 literature outlines what this entailed—a concern for 'the best use of leisure by the married folk and young men and women, and second the proper care of the bodies and minds of little children too young for school'; it seems probable that the GLCC offered nowhere near as specific a set of demands.²³ These concerns were constant themes in Denby's conceptualisation of housing. The most likely course of events was that once given the go-ahead to make Kensal House both a social and technical project, she, and others, decided these were the problems she wanted to address and then incorporated into the scheme the amenities and management techniques which would resolve them. The GLCC's Publicity Department then re-ordered these ideas into a posthumous brief for the promotional literature.

This discussion may suggest that once the decision to build the scheme had been made in November 1933, the brief, such as it ever was, was swiftly drawn up. As I shall show, this was not really the case, indeed the rather haphazard way in which new ideas and practices were incorporated into the scheme for Kensal House reinforces the suggestion that it was a project born equally of a social conscience and the desire to sell gas. That this was possible in a large capitalist organisation with responsibilities to shareholders, seems to have been due to the Governor, David Milne Watson. The scheme was his 'baby' and as Governor he could do more or less as he liked.²⁴

²² *Co-partners Magazine*, (1937), 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181-2.

²⁴ The minutes of the Court of Directors invariably end with words to the effect that it would be left to the Governor to resolve matters about Kensal House. LMA: B/GLCC/54-7.

KENSAL HOUSE: the construction period, 1934-1937

The decision to go ahead with the construction of the flats on the site at Kensal Green, north Kensington was taken in February 1934. It would be another eight months before any real progress was made in getting the project underway. In the meantime attention focused on making arrangements for the demolition of the gasholder on the site and negotiating with Kensington Borough Council over who should be responsible for the improvement of the frontage of the site which gave on to Ladbroke Grove.

On 5th October 1934, the Court received a report from the surveyor it had appointed to estimate the cost of redevelopment and building at Kensal Green. It was on his recommendation that the GLCC made the decision which finally inaugurated the process of constructing Kensal House. The surveyor suggested that the GLCC should form a public utility society to build the flats and enter into cooperation with the local authority in order to gain government subsidies to fund the scheme.²⁵ In view of the fact that Kensal House was intended as a model estate which would demonstrate the benefits of gas for low-rental housing, it seems rather surprising that no one had thought of this idea before. For such a scheme to be built in conformity with government standards and still display such an array of equipment and good planning, would be ample proof of gas' suitability for social housing and the GLCC would receive money so to do.

The surveyor's suggestion was accepted and the following week representatives of the company met with the Borough Engineer and Town

²⁵ Meetings between 23.3.34 LMA: B/GLCC/54 and 5.10.34 LMA: B/GLCC/55.

Clerk to discuss such a partnership. It was agreed by the Council on 30th October 1934 that provided the GLCC formed a public utility society to build and manage the flats and gave the Council the right to nominate tenants, the company would be entitled to a rate subsidy from the Council of three pounds and fifteen shillings per flat of which, at that date, there were to be 72.²⁶

The GLCC's Directors accepted these conditions. By the end of the year the Capitol Housing Association had been formed to assume responsibility for the scheme.²⁷ The matter was then passed to the Minister of Health who, after considerable discussion over the exact value of the site, agreed to pay the higher rate of subsidy, three pounds and ten shillings per person rehoused, for the scheme.²⁸ This decision was passed to the borough of Kensington on 22nd March 1935 which in turn recommended, on 26th March, that the scheme be approved.

Whilst the financial negotiations were taking place, Fry and Denby worked on the designs of Kensal House, copies of which dated November 1934, were lodged with both the LCC and the Ministry of Health.²⁹ The alterations made to the plans at this date and subsequently, chart the way the scheme developed from being a purely technological showcase into a social experiment. Originally the plan had been simply to construct three

²⁶ Minutes of the Royal Borough of Kensington (RBK) Housing Committee, 11.10.34 and RBK Council, meeting 30.10.34.

²⁷ In 1937, the directors of the Association were listed as: David Milne Watson (Chair), R.W.Foot, S.Lacey, S.C.Leslie, M.Milne Watson, Lady Maurice, Mrs Dudley Ward, Miss Elizabeth Denby. Source: letter-head found amongst material relating to Kensal House in RBKCCL: Local Studies section, MS 21391.

²⁸ Papers relating to the subsidy payable for Kensal House held at the PRO: file HLG/49/60 Kensington Metropolitan Borough, Ladbroke Grove, North End.

²⁹ See HLG/49/60 and LMA: GLC/AR/BR/17/075406.

blocks of flats: two which ran parallel to Ladbroke Grove, one following the curve of the, now demolished, gasholder site, with a third block at right angles to the Grove. In all these would contain 72 flats. It was then decided that a social club, run by the Feathers Club Association, should be incorporated into the estate.³⁰ This was to be built on the lower ground floor of the block nearest to Ladbroke Grove and would replace four flats; an amendment marked on the LCC and MOH copies of the plans. By March 1935 a playground had also been added, on the site of the gasholder.³¹ In May it was decided to include a nursery school on site, overlooking the playground.³² This, the final architectural addition to the scheme, received planning permission in November 1935.³³

Further complications, most of which were concerned with the conveyancing of the site from the GLCC to the Capitol Housing Association, held up the start of building work until early 1936. Finally, three years after the idea for the flats was first mooted, the estate was completed in December 1936. The tenants moved in during January 1937 and the scheme was formally opened by the Minister of Health, Sir Kingsley Wood, on March 15th.

KENSAL HOUSE

Every detail of the completed Kensal House was planned to fulfil the GLCC's brief to Denby and Fry to create the right living conditions in the slums through both technological and social means. The choice of the site,

³⁰ RBK to the MOH, 11.1.35, HLG/49/60. This decision was not recorded by the Directors' Court minutes until 3.5.35. B/GLCC/56. I will discuss the nature of the amenities provided in more detail later in the chapter.

³¹ HLG/49/60, Memorandum to the Minister of Health, 5.3.35.

³² Directors' Court minutes, 3.5.35. B/GLCC/56.

³³ Minutes of the RBK Council, meeting 7.11.35.

the plan of the flats, the type of amenities incorporated into the scheme and the philosophy of management once the estate was opened, all contributed to what Fry summarised as the ultimate purpose of their design: 'to build a group of homes where people whose incomes allow them little above sheer necessity could experience as full a life as can be.'³⁴

In its architectural and spatial form the scheme owed much to Sassoon House. The suggestion here is that as at Peckham Denby was responsible for the kitchen design and the conceptualisation of the interior plan, with Fry translating these ideas into three-dimensional form. Ideologically and symbolically, the projects were firmly linked. The better and consistent funding of Kensal House may have allowed for the social vision implicit in Peckham to be realised more completely but it too was a response to the discourses of citizenship, racial health and reform of the life of the working-class housewife, which I have discussed above.

The symbolism of the site on which it was decided to erect Kensal House should not be underestimated. It was built in Kensal Green, the area to the north end of Ladbroke Grove, north Kensington; a district recognised as one of the worst and most desolate parts of an otherwise prosperous borough. The social scientist Llewellyn Smith described it as '...distinguished by poverty and overcrowding...an isolated district lying between gasworks, railway line and a canal'.³⁵ To insert into this bleak area of slums the cream-painted modernist blocks of Kensal House was to make a deliberate point [7.1]. Like the settlement buildings of the nineteenth century and Sassoon House and the Pioneer Health Centre in

³⁴ Fry (1938), 56.

³⁵ Llewellyn Smith (1934), 427-428.

Peckham the difference of Kensal House, in form, content and scale, would serve as a sign of progress and possibility and infect others to emulate the example of the GLCC.

For Denby, the choice of site also had a personal resonance. North Kensington had been the location of her apprenticeship in housing. It was also an area she had left under a cloud. For Kensal House to have been built within walking distance of blocks built by her old employers, the KHT, must have given her a certain satisfaction.

Onto the triangular one and a half acre site at Kensal Green, Denby and Fry placed three blocks of flats, a row of shops and a nursery school [7.2]. The small block contains seven flats. The two others, both six storeys high, run north-south, parallel with Ladbroke Grove; their southern ends abutting the mainline railway. The eastern block, closest to the Grove, contains twenty flats and, at lower ground floor level, the Feathers Club room. The western block contains forty one flats and has a recreation room, again on the lower ground floor. To the rear of this block was built a playground for the older children. Around its perimeter the scheme's nursery school was sited.

As at Sassoon House, the flat blocks were constructed from a reinforced concrete frame and a unit plan was deployed, with slight variations, to keep costs down. Each block was composed of multiples of a basic unit of a pair of flats each side of an access staircase [7.3]. At ground-floor level the flats had two bedrooms, on the upper floors three bedrooms [7.4]. The space released at entrance level was used for pram and bicycle sheds.

The use of the internal staircase, rather than balcony access, represented a significant advance on Sassoon House. It was generally agreed, especially by advocates of the flat like Yorke and Gibberd, that direct access was a particularly good form of planning. The staircase occupied only a small amount of floor area thus limiting the cost of upkeep. It also allowed cross-ventilation and was 'ideal for large open sites where flats can be arranged in series, running north to south, to give west light to the living rooms on one side and east light to bedrooms on the other'.³⁶ Kensal House conformed exactly to these exhortations. Indeed, when Fry explained his choice of site layout in the Kensal House film and elsewhere, he used very similar language. The deployment of the *zeilenbau* principle of block orientation was a first for England and should again be understood as serving both functional ends (to bring health-giving light into the flats) and 'advertising' ends.

A further reason for the adoption of the direct-access plan was that it allowed one of Denby's aims in the design to be fulfilled, to 'secure serenity and privacy in the home life of the tenants'.³⁷ In the overcrowded tenements from which most of the tenants came, the privacy and space necessary for healthy family life was unattainable. Thus at Kensal House every effort was made to create as private a dwelling as possible. Direct staircase access meant there was not always someone walking past a family's flat on the way to their own dwelling as happened in the balcony-access system. It also allowed each tenant to have their own territory in the landing space. The flat itself was then designed to provide everything lacking in the slum dwelling: space, privacy and cleanliness.

³⁶ Yorke & Gibberd (1937), 26-7.

³⁷ Denby (1938a), 61.

KENSAL HOUSE: the Private Sphere

It was in the design of the living room and the kitchen that Denby and Fry were able to fulfil the GLCC's social and technological brief most closely.

The rooms were complements: the technology of the kitchen allowed the living room to become the focus of family life in the flat. The design of the kitchen is perhaps the finest element of what is, overall, an extremely well-designed interior. Like the flat as a whole, the kitchen was designed as part of a unit which would be repeated throughout the block [7.5] This contained the kitchen, the bathroom and w.c., and a drying balcony, a feature Denby had seen at Bagneux; each element slotted together into a space of approximately 11 feet square.

The housewives of Kensal House were given an extremely well-equipped and well-designed kitchen for social housing of this period. The plan, like that for Sassoon House, is of a working kitchen. Thus the space was zoned into areas for food preparation, cooking, and also laundry. Eating would take place in the living room, the family zone. Those amenities which required hot water were ranged against one wall which meant that, as at Sassoon House, they shared plumbing and flues with the bathroom equipment. A large butler's sink is flanked by generous draining boards. One is fixed and has storage space beneath; the other is removable to allow access to the gas copper which was stored below it. The placing of the copper was carefully thought out: the door to the drying balcony is at close hand thereby minimising the space across which heavy wet washing would be carried to be hung out to dry. On the wall opposite was the space for food storage and preparation. This contains a long work surface which has a recessed shelf beneath. Such an arrangement, also used for the

surface in front of the window, was recommended by Frederick because it allowed the housewife to sit down whilst preparing food. Cupboards, supported on narrow poles, are hung on the wall. There is also a hatch here through to the living room. The gas cooker stands at the end of this row, within easy reach of the food preparation table which runs the length of the window. A gas point, for a gas iron, was also provided [7.6].

The careful design of the kitchen, particularly the way it widens at the window end, creates the sensation of a spacious and comfortable working area. The scale of the kitchen, too, is remarkable, indeed that of the interior as a whole. The work surfaces and cupboards are all placed at heights commensurate with those of the women who would use them. It is possible to open cupboards and reach into them, without needing to stand on a stool.³⁸ Though there is no definitive evidence to support the contention, details such as these strongly support the fact that the kitchen was Denby's design.

As well as making the kitchen a pleasant and workable space to be in, Denby's concern to ensure privacy in the flat's design was also evident. The inclusion of a gas copper in the kitchen allowed laundry to be carried out at home in private for, as a commentator observed, '...very poor people are sensitive about displaying their underclothes to the neighbours'.³⁹ Privacy was further enhanced by Denby's inclusion of the drying balcony in place of the more usual facility of shared, and very public, washing lines

³⁸ Although some refurbishment of Kensal House has taken place since it opened, the flats remain remarkably intact in plan form. Some original kitchens have, more or less, survived, and I make my observations on scale and sensation from my visits to these spaces in May 1999. The female scale of the flats' design is akin to that experienced in a similarly female/male-authored project, the Schroder-Schrader house in Utrecht.

³⁹ Bertram (1937), 1009.

in an estate's communal areas. Washing could be hung up away from the public gaze but dry just as efficiently as if fully outside, thanks to the ventilation holes and large opening of the balcony [7.7].

The kitchens at Kensal House with their combination of good planning and cheap efficient equipment clearly fulfilled the GLCC's mission to apply technology to social ends. Fry summed this up neatly when he wrote: 'In this little kitchen the important work of the house is carried on without disturbing the life of the living room and with a lighter mind for that blessing'.⁴⁰ Freed from the burden of unnecessary housework, the Kensal House mothers would now have leisure time to devote to their families and, as I shall show, to their community.

The zoning of all the work to do with cooking into the kitchen and its efficient plan, which allowed it to be so small, meant that the maximum amount of space could be given over to what was, as Fry's comment implies, the most important room of the flat, the living room. Fry also gained space for this room by keeping the bedrooms small 'because you don't live in bedrooms all day', These reductions created a space of just over 15 by 12 feet (185 square feet).⁴¹

The living room was the space where family life would be lived to the full. Family meals would have to be eaten here. There was deliberately no space in the kitchen for this which made the living room the location for the daily coming together of the family. A coke fire provided the modern equivalent of the family hearth and, since it could not be used for cooking,

⁴⁰ Fry (1938). 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 57.

further reinforced the idea that the living room was just for living. The inclusion of the coke stove was also a further demonstration of the GLCC's system. Powered by smokeless fuel, it would reduce dirt and, Fry believed, would radiate heat from the living room into the adjacent bedroom and the hall.

The living room also contained a wireless speaker. By putting it in this room, the intention was surely to reinforce this space as one for family congregation. Its position above the coke fire was then significant: the combination of heat and amusement would draw the family together. Tenants could receive the home and light programmes of the BBC and ^{later} Radio Luxembourg. Transmission was switched off at 11 o'clock at night by the tenants or the caretaker who worked on a rota system.⁴² For some tenants, the wireless was not the sole form of entertainment, one family managed to fit a billiard table into the room.⁴³

The final element of the flats' design was the sun balcony [7.7]; a feature which Denby had already used at Sassoon House. This was a surrogate garden for the tenants and also served to relieve the closed-in feeling of living in a flat. At eight by five feet, it was designed to be large enough to hold a table or give sufficient space for children to play within sight of their mother. A deep window box was fixed into the balconies for tenants to use for growing plants and vegetables. The hanging out of washing was strictly forbidden.

⁴² Tenants (1999).

⁴³ Scenes in the Kensal House film show this.

The sun balcony also increased the amount of light coming into the living room; a policy pursued in the other rooms of the flats, all of which had large steel-framed windows. All the interiors were painted in light, bright colours in order to capture the light as it streamed through the flat. It also served to reinforce the difference between these flats and the dark and dirty tenements from which the tenants came. All walls were gloss painted to dado level, so they could be wiped clean, and distempered above. The living room was a combination of pink and cream; the parents' bedroom, blue, the children's grey. All the doors were stained a light brown, with only the frames and architraves painted. Dark-brown lino was laid throughout the flat.⁴⁴ As at Sassoon House, there were no mouldings; all the surfaces were to be dust-resistant. Although Denby had no control over the furnishing of the flats, she did arrange for tenants to buy furniture from her shop, House Furnishing Ltd (see chapter eight) on hire-purchase terms. A contemporary photograph shows the kind of furniture she thought best suited to the interiors [7.8]. Like the flats, this is lightly coloured, has limited upholstery so reducing the accumulation of dust, and was not too heavy to move around during cleaning.

Kensal House represented a considerable advance on the design and equipment provided at Sassoon House, especially since the rents were not much higher (nine shillings and sixpence for the two-bedroomed flats; eleven shillings and sixpence for the three-bedroomed). It did not, however, represent in any significant way an improvement on the reform of the private sphere that had been developed in Peckham. The real innovation at Kensal House was in the attention paid by those involved

⁴⁴ Tenants (1999).

to the relationship between the public and private sphere of the estate.

KENSAL HOUSE: the Public Sphere

For Denby and her collaborators, Kensal House represented a coordinated attempt to bring each inhabitant to citizenship through the provision of particular forms of both private and public space. A reformed and reforming private dwelling would enable each individual to assume its appropriate role within the family but would also put them into the position to take on their role within their community as a whole. Hence at Kensal House, extraordinary attention was paid to the creation of a public sphere which would both facilitate the formation of a sense of community and once it was formed, allow it to flourish. As I shall show, this required two types of provision: the 'designing in' of certain types of social amenities combined with the implementation of particular management practices.

There can be little doubt that it was Denby who was responsible for the design of the estate's social programme. Not only do the amenities provided correlate closely with what she had argued for in her writing and at NHFO but they were often run by reformers with whom she was friendly. Her contribution in this respect seems to have been recognised at the time. A writer in the RIBA's journal, in a description of an Institute visit to the newly-completed estate, noted its '...novel social organisation, for the creation of which Miss Elizabeth Denby has been responsible'.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *JRIBA* (1937b), 924.

It is significant that the amenities were all added to the estate before construction began. This meant that they would be viewed by the tenants as an integral and normal part of the estate. They were features which belonged to them just as their flats did. It was only by including such amenities 'right from the start' Denby had argued, that community life could be facilitated.⁴⁶ At Kensal House, these amenities were directed towards all the inhabitants but as far as Denby and many of her contemporaries were concerned the group they wanted to target most of all was children, hence the inclusion of a nursery school on the estate.

KENSAL HOUSE: the Nursery School

Like every other campaign for welfare reform which has been discussed in this thesis, those which argued for the provision of nursery schools for working-class children did so in the belief that such intervention would improve the quality of the race. In the introduction to her book, *The English Nursery School*, Phoebe Cusden described those who were fighting this cause as 'pioneers who, having seen a vision of what childhood might be and of the nobler race that might grow out of it, spent their lives and energies in a supreme effort to translate that vision into realities in the slums of our great cities'.⁴⁷

Chief amongst these pioneers had been the Bradford-born social reformer Margaret McMillan and her sister Rachel. Together they had developed a system of nursery school education which stressed an open-air environment, free play, the encouragement of self-responsibility and

⁴⁶ Denby (1934e), 270.

⁴⁷ Cusden (1938), 1. Cusden was the first Organising Secretary of the Nursery School Association.

healthy exercise.⁴⁸ This model was taken up by the Nursery School Association (NSA) which was founded as a voluntary sector group in 1923 with Margaret McMillan as president. Its immediate concern was 'to guide the development of children whose parents cannot give them all the care necessary from the age when they cease to attend infant welfare centres...until they go to school at five years'.⁴⁹ It was widely felt that children were too precious a commodity to be left to the care of parents in unhealthy and inadequately equipped homes. If children could be removed to a decent environment before the age of five then, as Rachel McMillan argued 'much...physical and mental impairment can be prevented...'.⁵⁰

Though groups like the NSA were convinced of the importance of the nursery school, central government was not. Under the 1918 Education Act, local authorities had only the discretionary right to establish nursery schools. In response, the NSA, like other bodies within the voluntary sector, adopted the New Philanthropy technique of advocating the nursery school on the grounds of national responsibility whilst at the same time its adherents established model schools themselves. By 1937 of the 87 nursery schools recognised by the Board of Education, over half were run by the voluntary sector.⁵¹

The passage of successive slum clearance acts in the 1930s gave renewed impetus to the NSA's campaign. Cusden wrote that '...the opportunity for

⁴⁸ Bradburn (1989), 140-144.

⁴⁹ Myles-Wright & Gardner-Medwin (1938), 14.

⁵⁰ Cusden (1938), 9. A belief echoed two decades later by the doctors at the PHC.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 15.

the comprehensive planning of new communities was unexampled'.⁵² The NSA stepped up its work and urged that space be set aside for nursery schools in any new housing scheme. Again, central government refused to make such provision compulsory. A report issued in 1933 by a Board of Education consultative committee on infant and nursery schools merely noted that they were a desirable but not imperative addition to existing schools or new housing schemes.⁵³

By the mid-1930s the nursery school had become a significant political issue. It was an issue advocated not just by progressive reformers but also all the major political parties. Yet still few new schools were being built. Someone or somebody needed to translate talk into construction. In view of the favourable climate of opinion, it is not surprising that the GLCC should have decided that the inclusion of a nursery school on its model estate would be a good idea.

The suggestion was most probably Denby's. Her definition of housing as something which should include as many amenities as possible and as something which should enhance both the physical and the social life of the inhabitants meant that she would inevitably have been an advocate of nursery schools. Quite when her interest began is unclear. According to Whitebread in her history of nursery education in Britain, the Independent Labour Party consistently supported the nursery school movement, presumably under the influence of Margaret McMillan, so Denby may have gained an interest in the campaign early in her life.⁵⁴ If

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁵⁴ Whitebread (1972), 76.

the interest did not come from the ILP, it would have been encouraged by her work in north Kensington in the 1920s. Amongst the many campaigns of the KCSS was one for the construction of a nursery school in the area.⁵⁵

By 1934, Denby was making it clear in her writing that the nursery school was a vital element in any housing scheme: ‘...it would cut off the slum tradition at the root’ and enable the child to learn ‘...cleanliness, order, beauty...[in an environment] in which sleep, play and quiet were possible’.⁵⁶ A section of the NHFO exhibition in 1934 was devoted to the nursery school. It was organised by Denby’s close friend Marjory Allen who had recently become a member of the NSA; rapidly becoming one its main spokeswomen.⁵⁷

It was perhaps Allen’s involvement in the NSA and a desire to reinforce the message of the NHFO exhibition which planted the idea for a nursery school at Kensal House in Denby’s mind. Certainly Allen was recruited to help make the case.⁵⁸ In May 1935, David Milne Watson announced that the GLCC would pay for a nursery school to be built at a cost of 2,500 pounds.⁵⁹ The inclusion of the scheme was a clever move by the GLCC. It would make its scheme popular amongst reformers and without too much expense on the company’s part. Apart from the initial outlay, the upkeep of the school would be met by grants from the Board of Education,

⁵⁵ This opened in Kensal Road in 1931 on a site very close to where Kensal House would be built.

⁵⁶ Denby (1934 d), 942.

⁵⁷ Allen & Nicholson (1975), 116-117.

⁵⁸ Fry (1975), 144, refers to the ‘indefatigably solicitous Lady Allen of Hurtwood’ in his description of the production of Kensal House.

⁵⁹ Meeting of the GLCC Court of Directors, 3.5.35, LMA: B/ GLCC/ 56.

the LCC^{and} the remaining quarter by the GLCC.⁶⁰ Indeed, it may be that the decision to include the school was precipitated by the confirmation that the company would receive government subsidies to build the flats, thus freeing funds for the estate's public sphere. Kensal House could now be even more of a model estate.

'The nursery school is a delight', wrote Denby shortly after the estate opened. Built on the west-side of the children's playground, the school is semi-circular in form and comprises three large playrooms all with large windows which could be folded back to let as much light and air into the interiors as possible [7.9]. In front of the school ran a terrace shaded by a canopy cantilevered from the first floor of the school. At one end of the building was constructed a paddling pool in which the children played naked, much to the disapproval of some parents, and a sandpit.⁶¹ The school was based on the McMillan method, hence its open-air design, and run by a McMillan-trained nurse.

The McMillan system had three main objectives: nurture, to give children much needed physical care; the provision of an appropriate, child-centred rather than subject-centred education; and to strive to impair the child-rearing practices of the parents.⁶² This it did by keeping the children at the school as long as possible. At Kensal House, mothers could leave the children at the school at 8 o'clock in the morning and collect them at 5 o'clock at night.

⁶⁰ Denby (1938a), 62.

⁶¹ Tenants (1999).

⁶² Bradburn (1989), 179.

The nursery had sixty places. Priority was given to children from the estate, but those from outside were also eligible. A typical day at the nursery would see the child arrive, undergo inspection by the nurse and receive a dose of cod-liver oil; necessary since many of the children were malnourished. The children changed into overalls and then spent the morning and afternoon at play. This activity was interspersed with morning milk, mid-day dinner, tea and an afternoon nap. The provision of nourishing meals and regular sleep was intended to establish the good and health-giving eating and sleeping patterns not possible in noisy slum accommodation. There was also much emphasis on hygiene: the daily inspection by the nurse and the provision of a toothbrush and facecloth so that each child could learn to clean itself after meals.

Similarly, the children's activities, though play-centred, were intended to inculcate good habits in their everyday life. Cusden wrote that the nursery school should be an environment where:

the child may indulge in pursuits that will satisfy his healthy curiosity, develop strength and imagination, self-reliance and courage; and by no means least, in which he may learn to cooperate with others and to reconcile the legitimate claims of self with the equally legitimate claims of society...this is what the normal child needs and which must be provided if the nation is to achieve for each of its citizens the ideal, desirable for Britain, no less than in ancient Rome, *mens sana in corpore sano*.⁶³

Hence there was much emphasis on group games and at dinner times, children took turns to fetch the meals for each other.⁶⁴

Cusden's comment clearly reveals how the nursery school was seen as a site which would enable the child to develop both as an individual and as

⁶³ Cusden (1938), 32-33.

⁶⁴ This can be seen in the Kensal House film.

a member of society. The improvement to their lives and manners would, it was hoped, also rub off on their parents who were encouraged to become involved in the school's educational programme.⁶⁵ Whether this happened is hard to ascertain but in the short term Denby believed the reformed environment was proving effective: 'it is like a conjuring trick to see how infants entering at two years of age with the expression of men who have been through Borstal and Wormwood Scrubs are in a couple of months transformed into carefree happy babies'.⁶⁶

The child population of Kensal House was not confined to the two to fives. In all there were 244 children on the estate (out of a total population of 380) of whom 130 were between five and fourteen. Their lessons in citizenship would, it was hoped, be learnt at school. At Kensal House, they would be best served by provision for healthy exercise and appropriate leisure activities. The circular playground with goal-posts and netball apparatus was aimed at these children. Tenants recall a Kensal House cricket team and football team. For indoor healthy play, a recreation room was also provided in the foot of the west block. Boys and girls met separately four out of six nights and jointly on two. Boys could have boxing lessons, girls enjoyed the more gentle pursuits of brownies and girl guides. There was also a Sunday School.⁶⁷

The children's club was organised by an organisation called the Feathers Club Association. It also had responsibility for the club in the basement of the east block which was aimed at the adult population of the estate. The

⁶⁵ *Gas Journal* (1937), 782.

⁶⁶ Denby (1938a), 62.

⁶⁷ Tenants (1999).

inclusion of these clubs was another initiative of Denby's and, like the nursery school, was intended to facilitate the community life of the estate and develop the tenants' sense of citizenship.

THE FEATHERS CLUBS

The Feathers Club Association (FCA) was incorporated in March 1935 to oversee the running of a series of clubs 'for friendship, occupation and recreation' which had been built in slum areas in and around north Kensington.⁶⁸ The establishment of the first club in 1933 was a response to the intimation by the Prince of Wales that he would like to see his circle of friends make some form of direct contribution to the improvement of the conditions of the urban poor. How much the Prince was involved in deciding what this contribution should be is not clear. According to the Prince's biographer he told his then girlfriend Freda Dudley Ward that she should raise funds to establish social clubs for the families of the unemployed.⁶⁹ Janet Pott gives another version.⁷⁰ She recalled that Dudley Ward and her friends approached Denby with the vague idea that they might start a soup kitchen. Denby rejected this and suggested that it would be much more useful to build a club in a slum area. This would be a place for social interaction but would also be equipped with carpentry tools and sewing machines so that adults could mend furniture, make clothes and so on; conceivably an idea she had borrowed from the PHC. This was the idea that was taken up and in 1933 the first Feathers Club was opened at 325 Kensal Road, north Kensington in a building designed by

⁶⁸ Motto of the FCA on its *Annual Reports*, 1934+. No history of the FCA exists. I have assembled my account of its activities from surviving minute books held by the FCA at their offices in Marylebone, from *Annual Reports* held at the RBKCCL, interviews and the few references to the clubs in biographies of the Duke of Windsor.

⁶⁹ Donaldson (1951), 134.

⁷⁰ Pott (1995).

Denby's friends Janet Pott and Alison Shepherd^h. The club's name giving a clear hint of its (silent) founding father.

Between 1933 and 1935, three further Feathers Clubs were founded in Notting Hill (designed by Wells Coates), Chelsea and Marylebone. As yet, these were all independent groups, paid for by Ward's fundraising, but initiated and run by individual groups of voluntary social workers. It was in March 1935 that the FCA was formed as the umbrella organisation to oversee the running of all these separate clubs. This move coincided with the decision by the GLCC to incorporate a Feathers Club into Kensal House.

I have already noted how important Denby believed a sense of community was to the successful running of an estate once it was completed. Like many reformers of her generation, and reflecting the permeation of Idealist philosophy into the aims of social welfare reform, she believed that the sign of a progressive, and progressing, society was a flourishing communal life.⁷¹ The inclusion of a Feathers Club in the foot of each block of Kensal House would on the one hand provide a location for a community life to take place and, on the other, through the kind of activities which went on within it, help it to develop.

The newly incorporated FCA included Denby and Mrs Sassoon on its council, with Ward as chair.⁷² It agreed that the first Feathers Club should be transferred into Kensal House. This would ensure a membership for the

⁷¹ This was the yardstick used by social investigators like Ruth Durant in her work at Becontree.

⁷² FCA council meeting minutes, March 1935. Denby remained on council, though not very active, until January 1950. Mrs Sassoon was a significant source of funds until the late 1950s.

club from both within the estate and from outside it. Kensal Road was close by Kensal House and the FCA as a body was determined that '...the opportunities offered by them [the Clubs], both for the development of the individual and for corporate service to the community, may be open to an ever increasing number of our fellow citizens'.⁷³

The First Feathers Club at Kensal House had two target audiences, the adolescents and the adults. The aim of the club provided for the adolescents was to accommodate '...these years of mental and physical coming to maturity...which are most inadequately provided for in present-day London conditions'. The solution was a location for '...plenty of active sport, intelligent hobbies and cheerful mixed recreation'.⁷⁴ The 'best use of leisure' for the teenagers of Kensal House would not involve the cinema or dancing at the local *palais de danse*. They would be exposed to refined leisure, designed to enable the young people to improve themselves. They would be encouraged 'to make their own equipment and societies for sport and study'.⁷⁵

These activities took place in the recreation room in the west block of the estate. The main Feathers Club, for adults, was in the east block. The facilities on offer here, it was hoped, would 'give full scope for a free social life'. To this end, the club consisted of a large room with a stage at one end and a snack bar at the other, and smaller rooms which were equipped for 'making and mending furniture, boot repairing and sewing'.⁷⁶ Such facilities clearly would assist the tenants in making ends meet but they

⁷³ FCA *Annual Report*, 1937-38, v.

⁷⁴ Capitol Housing Association (1937), 18.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

were also intended, given the emphasis on regenerating the family which pervaded Kensal House, to help foster a sense^{of} pride in homemaking amongst the male tenants.

Another function of the social club was to help improve marital relations; something the PHC had also been interested in doing. For the housewife to be able to get out of the house into a (wholesome) social environment was, the GLCC considered 'one of the most important factors in keeping home life fresh and peaceful'. In the evenings, with the children packed off to the club in the west block, 'the men can come down with their wives for a pleasant social hour or two after the day's work is done'.⁷⁷

Whether the clubs had this effect in practice is impossible to ascertain. That they were much used is known and tenants recall a Feathers Club band, song and regular dances. Tenants also seem to have taken responsibility for making their own leisure, thereby proving the doctrine of exposure to possibilities true. Dressmaking classes were offered by one of the tenants who worked for a London couture house; music lessons were also available and in wartime, two of the women tenants ran a dinner club for the tenants.⁷⁸

The clubs were one means through which the tenants could feel that they belonged to Kensal House and that Kensal House belonged to them. In seeking techniques to achieve this aim, Denby recognised a fundamental truth that for social housing to succeed its tenants needed to feel a sense of ownership and a sense of responsibility for the place. Such a sentiment

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Tenants (1999).

would also help foster their sense of citizenship. This, however, was not something which could be achieved primarily by material means but rather by the manner in which the estate was run.

When Kensal House was completed Denby was appointed Housing Director of Kensal House by the GLCC in order 'to remain in touch with the estate and keep it on experimental lines'.⁷⁹ This post allowed Denby to instigate the particular system of management which would allow the tenants to feel pride in and responsibility for their new homes. She said 'the spirit of the estate is that the people run it themselves'.⁸⁰ Such practice in democracy on the small scale of the estate would prepare them for participation in the democracy outside it.

Running the estate themselves began with the space outside the tenants' flats. Each family belonged to a staircase committee which was responsible for looking after the communal areas around their flats. From this committee two representatives would be selected to serve on what was the most innovative feature of Kensal House, its tenants' committee. This was set up following a mass meeting of the tenants organised by Denby shortly after the estate was opened. Tenants could put their grievance to their representatives who then met monthly with Denby. A quarterly parliament was held which all the adult tenants could attend.⁸¹ Denby acknowledged that in practice 'this was more difficult than it sounds' but stressed '[that] everyone seems quite happy as things are working out'.⁸²

⁷⁹ Denby (1938a), she held this post until 1945.

⁸⁰ Denby speaking in the Kensal House film.

⁸¹ Denby (1937f), 13.

⁸² Denby speaking in the Kensal House film.

The collaboration amongst the GLCC, Denby and Fry, their deployment of a range of techniques which varied from the architectural to the technological to the social produced something which Denby described as an 'urban village', the most complete expression of her views on the form flatted accommodation for former slumdwellers should take.⁸³ The nomenclature is significant for it signals one further thing Denby sought to achieve through this model of social housing: the regeneration of the urban environment.

Like most reformers of her generation Denby was concerned by the conditions in the modern city which were causing so many of its inhabitants to flee to live in the suburbs and countryside, a process which was slowly engulfing rural England. Many of her contemporaries interpreted this shift in population as a sign of the inappropriateness of the city for dwelling and argued for the further decentralisation of inner-city populations and their relocation to planned garden cities firmly embedded within land-preserving green belts. Denby shared with the garden city movement the desire to reunite the urban population with nature but unlike them she believed it was both possible and more desirable to bring this about within the existing urban context.

Denby was fully aware that modern urban life was not without problems: it was unhygienic, its inhabitants had lost contact with nature and traditional ways of life and thus become devitalised. The flight to the suburbs had abandoned those who remained in cities to single-class communities with little chance of improvement due to the absence of a

⁸³ Denby (1938a), 60.

better example. Much needed to be improved if urban life were to be made viable. The urban village concept was an attempt to resolve these problems. All the elements which made village life so desirable - community life, the proximity of nature, the house with a garden - would be transplanted and translated into an urban context. This was a technique already tried out in prototype at Peckham. Sassoon House was the urban equivalent of the village: a modern flat was a cottage with a balcony for a garden. The PHC was the village hall. When it was opened a commentator in the *Architectural Review* characterised it as such, observing that it would be the focus 'around which a genuine urban life could revolve'.⁸⁴

Kensal House was the urban village concept writ large. A village in the city, it comprised modern dwellings in which people would want, and could afford, to live. In lieu of gardens tenants had not just a sun balcony but also plots for allotments and some greenery in the land between the west and eastern blocks. The Feathers Clubs provided the village hall. There would be no need to escape the city if it were replanned on lines such as these.

KENSAL HOUSE: Reception, Representation and Consumption

In my account of Sassoon House I noted that in order for Denby to make her role of housing consultant known she depended to a significant degree upon the amount of coverage the scheme received in the contemporary press and related literature. Sassoon House, although it was reported in the weekly architectural press, was not quite as heavily promoted as Denby might have wished. The same cannot be said for Kensal House which

⁸⁴ AR (1935), 203.

received extensive coverage both at the time of its opening and subsequently.

As might be expected, chief amongst those who covered the estate was the architectural press. Following its opening all the major architectural journals ran features on the scheme. The *Architectural Review*, which had earlier ignored Sassoon House, carried photographs and a brief description, but no analysis, of Kensal House.⁸⁵ The coverage in the *Architect and Building News* was more extensive. One issue had the scheme on its cover and an editorial which commented that at Kensal House 'the modern spirit of urbanism is thoroughly alive'.⁸⁶ A subsequent issue devoted several pages to the scheme, describing it as 'the latest and by far the most important contribution to the development of working-class housing in London'.⁸⁷

The fact that Kensal House was featured, albeit briefly, in the flagship journal of the Architectural Press, the *Architectural Review*, suggests how significant a scheme it was for those who were promoting modernism at this date. Almost immediately, it became one of the canon of buildings included in any publication, especially those issued by the Press, on modern architecture. Yorke and Gibberd's *The Modern Flat* devotes four pages to Kensal House (two to Sassoon House) whilst the Press's 1938 book *The Design of Nursery and Elementary Schools*, featured the nursery school extensively.⁸⁸ In the MARS Exhibition of 1938 photographs of Kensal House were displayed. In Sadie Speight and Leslie Martin's *The*

⁸⁵ *AR* (1937).

⁸⁶ *ABN* (1937a), 347 & front cover.

⁸⁷ *ABN* (1937b), 380-384.

⁸⁸ Yorke & Gibberd (1937), 98-101 and Myles-Wright & Gardner-Medwin (1938).

Flat Book of 1939 a plan of one of the flats is included amongst those considered to offer a particularly exemplary approach to flat design.⁸⁹

Kensal House was also covered by writers in North America. The *Architectural Record* of July 1937 carried a small feature on the scheme but much more significant was its inclusion, with Sassoon House, in the exhibition, 'Modern Architecture in England', held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1937, alongside the work of architects like Coates, Tecton and Connell, Ward and Lucas.⁹⁰

Kensal House was clearly seen as a model of flat design by advocates of modernism but it was also widely-appreciated by progressive reformers in other fields. Thus it is possible to find accounts of the scheme in the non-architectural press and literature of the day, the authors of which cite Kensal House as an exemplar of housing practice and a model for future schemes. Phoebe Cusden, writing within months of Kensal House's opening, singled out the inclusion of a nursery school there as of 'particular interest' and described it as 'an attractive example of planning to provide on a restricted area the essential features of a good nursery school'.⁹¹ Marjory Spring Rice included a picture of the Feathers Club in *Working Class Wives*, which suggests that in Kensal House she saw a type of housing best suited to ameliorating the conditions she had uncovered in her investigations.⁹² Denby's former colleagues in the London housing association movement also commented approvingly on the flats. The

⁸⁹ Martin & Speight (1939), 11.

⁹⁰ *Architectural Record* (1937), 27 and MOMA (1937). It is also worth noting that Kensal House's membership of the canon of significant modernist buildings is further reinforced by its use in one of Abram Games' posters for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs' series 'Your Britain, Fight for it', alongside the Finsbury Health Centre, in 1942 [7.10]. See Howard Gardens Gallery (1990) for a discussion of Games' posters.

⁹¹ Cusden (1938), 192. She also included a photograph of the school.

⁹² Spring Rice (1939/81), plate 14, opposite 117.

Editor of *The Phoenix*, journal of the Fulham Housing Association and the KHT, wrote of how 'architecturally and financially, these flats are immensely interesting to those of us who have been striving for years to discover the ideal'. The Tenants' Committee and Feathers Club were singled out as likely 'to make for a permanent happiness and homeliness on the estate'.⁹³

Perhaps the most significant approbation came from the BBC. In November 1937 the architectural critic Anthony Bertram reported on various new housing schemes which had been built in England and Wales for a programme called 'Housing the Workers'. Bertram's opening words, transcribed in *The Listener*, show how much he shared with Denby's philosophy. He pleaded for: '...the importance of giving beautiful, dignified and efficient homes to our people, and of improving instead of destroying the beauty of our cities'. These criteria he found in several schemes, including Sassoon House which he called 'another excellent little scheme', but his favourite was Kensal House, 'which really is the last word in working class flats'.⁹⁴

Reporting on Kensal House was not confined to architectural and lay publications. Amongst the many advantages for Denby of the collaboration with the GLCC on Kensal House was the fact that it brought with it the considerable resources for public relations that the company and the gas industry as a whole had been developing since the 1910s. Both the GLCC and the BCGA promoted Kensal House extensively in a variety of media: their own house periodicals, through advertising and film.

⁹³ *The Phoenix* (1937a), 1.

⁹⁴ Bertram (1937), 1007-1009.

The coverage of Kensal House in the gas press was fairly standard. All the reporters seem to have used the same press release and stressed the use of the GLCC's 'system' whilst also noting how the flats were a notable contribution to the solution of the problem of working-class housing.⁹⁵ A similar line was taken in the booklets issued by the GLCC and the BCGA to coincide with the opening of Kensal House. The BCGA published *Kensal House, the Case for Gas is proved*; the GLCC, through its offshoot the Capitol Housing Association, *Kensal House, a Contribution to the New London*. The main concern of the BCGA booklet, written by S.C. Leslie, was to demonstrate how the economy of the gas system released money to the family budget and thus contributed to healthier standards of living. The GLCC's booklet contains a similar argument though it looks and reads more like a guidebook to the estate [7.11].

Suppliers to the gas industry also took advantage of Kensal House to promote their wares. In 1938, Ascot Gas Water Heaters Ltd, whose heaters powered the kitchens and bathrooms of Kensal House, published a book called *Flats, Municipal and Private Enterprise*. This was essentially a catalogue of housing schemes in which its products were used but it did pay particular attention to Kensal House. It includes two articles on the scheme, one by Fry and one by Denby, a rare example of her describing one of her projects and from which I have already quoted extensively.⁹⁶

Such publications, with some exceptions, were essentially well-written puff and post-rationalisation; advertising disguised as journalism. Leslie

⁹⁵ See, for example, *Gas Bulletin* (1937), *Gas World* (1937).

⁹⁶ See Denby (1938a); she also wrote a very similar article on the scheme for *The Phoenix*, Denby (1937f).

himself wrote in the *Gas Bulletin* of how Kensal House 'offered the gas industry some valuable basic material on which sales and propaganda could be established'.⁹⁷ Thus it is not surprising that Kensal House was used extensively as a vehicle for advertising the industry's goods and services. A typical ^{advertisement} juxtaposes an image of the nursery school with one of its pupils and their teacher; the by-line stresses how gas is the cheapest fuel on tap [7.12]. In keeping with the drive to modernise the GLCC, the composition and graphic design of these adverts was clearly, though not excessively, indebted to contemporary developments in art photography.

The use and promotion of Kensal House was not confined to print advertising. In 1937 the BCGA produced a film about the estate as part of its on-going policy of making documentary films about contemporary social problems.⁹⁸ The deployment of film, the most modern of media techniques, by the BCGA offers another example of the way the industry sought to update its image. The choice of subject matter also allowed it to benefit from what was called 'promotion by association'.⁹⁹ The film on Kensal House would link the GLCC with a progressive approach to housing whilst the modernism of the scheme had useful value as an image.¹⁰⁰ Leslie recalled that the hope was that it would combat the 'prevalent identification of electricity with the millennium...'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Leslie (1937b), 127.

⁹⁸ *Kensal House* (GB), 1937, dir. Frank Sainsbury, prod. BCGA.

⁹⁹ Sydney Box, producer, quoted in Haggith (1998), 54.

¹⁰⁰ These films did not have theatre release, but were shown to the industry itself, at exhibitions, and to film groups and local voluntary organisations. The sort of audience who might well be in a position to agitate for housing reform.

¹⁰¹ Leslie in Haggith (1998). Haggith also notes that Laszlo Moholy Nagy was commissioned by Leslie to design a poster 'Helping to Build the New London'.

Film was clearly an important technique through which the battle to increase gas consumption could be fought, yet though motivated primarily by commercial ends this film-making, like Kensal House itself, did not have to be quite so progressive as it was. A degree of altruism does seem to have influenced the work of the BCGA. Leslie commented how there was an element of 'personal bonus' in the choice of film subject matter. He saw the films as 'a contribution towards lifting us out of the morass of poverty in which so many were floundering...'.¹⁰² The showing of the film about Kensal House might sell gas but it would also raise awareness of the issue of slum clearance, which was a positive end in itself.

The film *Kensal House* is, on one level, very simple. It tells the story of the estate and conveys how cheap it is to live in because it is powered by gas. At another level, it is extremely clever for its composition mirrors the way the estate was conceived and managed. The film is not narrated with a voice-over by a well-spoken unseen narrator. Instead, the viewers sees and hears all those involved in the project: the GLCC, Denby, Fry and the tenants. They all speak to camera as well as narrate images of the estate. And even though the film is opened and closed by representative of the GLCC, the film is very much dominated by the tenants.

The film opens with David Milne-Watson introducing the idea of the gas 'system' and describing the recruitment of 'a group of first rate architects, Max Fry as executant, Miss Elizabeth Denby as specialist consultant'.¹⁰³ He then hands over the narration to one of the tenants for, as he comments,

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ All quotations are taken directly from the film until signalled otherwise.

'...they know more about what life at Kensal House is all about'. The majority of the rest of the film then cuts between the commentary offered by the tenants and a description of the design and management of the estate by Fry and Denby.

This first section of the film opens with scenes of Kensal Green which the film's main tenant narrator, George Aldridge, describes as 'not an ideal place to live in'. Scenes then show the dwellings in which the future tenants of Kensal House lived. The Shepherd family are seen crammed into their tenement home. The Burkes eat and live in one room and have to cook on the landing. Aldridge stresses the inconvenience and dirt of such accommodation.

In sharp contrast, the film then cuts to Fry who discusses the design of the estate followed by footage of the tenants in their new surroundings. Mrs Cole comments on the nursery and the Feathers Club, Aldridge notes '...plenty of room now for the Shepherd family and no cooking in the living room either...her own kitchen with a gas cooker complete...'. Mrs Wimborne says 'My family thinks the gas cooker is splendid...now I can keep all my kitchen in one room and have a real living room without any dirt'. This section is finished by Denby who describes the management of the estate and points out the importance of the balcony. The closing section of film reverts to the GLCC's representatives. Robert Foot, the General Manager, explains how cheap the scheme is to run and various charts are shown to display comparative tariffs. The camera then pans out over the roofs of Kensal House and the film ends.

The extensive coverage of Kensal House in all forms of media brought publicity to all involved. The gas industry had clearly associated itself with a progressive scheme and had been recognised as so doing. Fry's credentials as a modernist were further strengthened. For Denby the coverage provided the clearest and most widespread account of her work to that date. Her authorship of major aspects of the estate's design and management was in print and on celluloid.

All this work had little to do with the day-to-day realities of Kensal House. Though such promotional work was clearly to Denby's advantage, she was also concerned about how the estate would work once opened. She wrote of how, in spite of 'the care taken in every detail...all the thought we had given [to the design]...', she was 'undoubtedly nervous how the cake would be in the eating'.¹⁰⁴ Kensal House was Denby's first opportunity to put into practice her theory of the necessity of good management for any social housing scheme to work; her position as Housing Director enabled her to do this.

Denby was responsible to the 380 inhabitants of Kensal House, of whom 244 were children. Most of them came, as the subsidy agreement required, from Kensington borough council's housing list. Of these most had lived in houses categorised as overcrowded, there were also four families who were rehoused from basement dwellings. Ten tenants were employees of the GLCC, all lived in housing designated as congested.¹⁰⁵ As the number of children on the estate suggests, most of the families were large. The Shepherds, who featured in the Kensal House film, had seven children,

¹⁰⁴ Denby (1937f), 12.

¹⁰⁵ Table of Analysis of Tenancies for Kensal House, RBKC Council Minutes, 5.4.38.

most had three or four.¹⁰⁶ All were poor. Denby said 'many of them [were] really poor', but at Kensal House many paid less rent than for their old, often one-room, dwellings.¹⁰⁷

Denby tried to make the transition from slum to new dwelling as simple as possible, a process she describes in her account of the estate in *The Phoenix*. Before the tenants moved in Denby held tea-parties for them at which she gave them the key to their new flat and allowed them 'to measure up and get the feel of the place'. On moving-in day, she arranged that they were welcomed and settled in 'by a woman architect friend of mine'.¹⁰⁸ She then set about initiating the tenants' committee as described above. Once the tenants were settled, she visited their flats from time to time and was always available to give advice or listen to problems. Tenants recall that she was 'very nice'.¹⁰⁹

Denby's account also gives some idea of how the tenants responded to the estate. That there were problems early on with cleanliness is apparent from her observation that hygiene 'had to be more scrupulous in an estate inhabited by 380 persons who are used to a street playground and the regular passage of the Borough Council street-sweepers'. Her account though was generally positive. She comments on how the tenants 'are aglow with pride at their new homes and their responsibility for managing them'.¹¹⁰ The daughter of an original tenant recalled how her

¹⁰⁶ List of Kensal House Tenants, 1939, RBKCCL, local studies library, material relating to Kensal House, MSS 21391-21396.

¹⁰⁷ Denby (1937f), 15.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 12. The architect may have been Mary Crowley (Medd).

¹⁰⁹ Tenants (1999).

¹¹⁰ Denby (1937f), 15.

mother kept the flat sparklingly clean because she was so proud of it and relieved to leave her tenement home behind.¹¹¹ Not surprisingly, Denby viewed the experiment as a success and concluded 'the tenants are to my biased mind a fine example of the latent potentialities in every slum dweller which only need freeing from weed before they flower'.¹¹²

Her observations are reinforced by the comments made by the tenants in the Kensal House film who are depicted as delighted with their new homes. Similarly, the *Gas Bulletin* quotes a tenant 'it is like heaven'.¹¹³ Though the gas industry was unlikely to publish negative responses, it can be imagined that in the first months of residence Kensal House must have seemed a paradise in comparison to the dwellings from which the tenants came. In the longer term, some sense of what the tenants themselves thought of Kensal House is possible to gauge for there survives a survey made of the tenants in 1942 in which they were asked what they thought of the estate.¹¹⁴

Of the original sixty eight families, fifty eight were still in occupation five years later, enough time to have lived with the experiment and gained a perspective on its merits. The overwhelming tenor of the report was positive. Sixty one of the families believed they were better off at Kensal House and Milne declared 'the water heater at the sink, their own bathroom, the coke grate, the splendid draining boards in the kitchen, the sun balcony and their own wash copper, these the majority would not be

¹¹¹ Tenants (1999).

¹¹² Denby (1937f), 16.

¹¹³ *Gas Bulletin* (1937), 55.

¹¹⁴ GLCC (1942); the research was carried out by a publicity journalist called Marjorie Bruce-Milne.

without'.¹¹⁵ There were, however, some problems. Three issues were mentioned frequently by the tenants: dampness, described as 'oozing out of the walls', noise, in particular from the Feathers Club, exacerbated by the concrete construction and the low ceilings; and the shabby conditions; upkeep does not appear to have been carried out on a regular basis.

The tenants also make some interesting comments on the rooms which Denby and Fry saw as the most important in the flats, the living room and the kitchen. Intended as labour-saving and hygienic they were problematic in practice. The drying balcony was said to be too small to hold sheets and blankets. This meant that tenants used the sun balcony instead which was prohibited or as in the case of one tenant dried laundry inside over the cooker with the grill on!

Tenants also seem to have resisted the idea that only work should be carried out in the kitchen. Twenty one families ate or sometimes ate in the kitchen 'perched at the ironing board or by the hatch'. One tenant explained 'we nearly always eat in the kitchen so as to keep the sitting room tidy'. This response was a common one. Tenants did not like the fact that they had only one living space, something which was made particularly problematic by the specific circumstances facing the tenants. Many of the husbands worked outdoors and came home dirty. 'I want somewhere to dry my man's clothes. He does outdoor work. He can't help it but he comes home filthy. Where am I to dry his clothes? There is no room in the kitchen and there is nothing to do with it. It means we have to sit with them here in the evening'.

¹¹⁵*Ibid*, 2.

Another problem was the size of many of the families; the cooker could not cope with such demand and dinner had to be prepared in relays. In addition the wear and tear exacted by large numbers of children on living-room furniture caused heartache for families who had bought new furniture or whose just about respectable settee quickly became shabby. One tenant was recorded as keeping her settee and armchairs in the bedroom and dragged them into the living room only when there were visitors. These observations reflect the desire of the tenants for a separate space in which to eat, or a kitchen large enough to sit in and live in so that the living room could be a more special space.¹¹⁶

In surveys such as these, the tendency is often to focus on what is wrong with something rather than that which is right. So whilst the survey allows an understanding of the reception of the flats' design and gives a fascinating insight into how ordinary working people viewed and used their homes at this date, it also shows that despite these quibbles, the tenants were grateful for and appreciated the opportunities offered by Kensal House.

At Kensal House was realised Denby's model of housing both in the way it was designed and in the facilities and amenities it included and the way it was run once opened. It was widely praised and, if Fry is to be believed, attracted the support of royalty. He recalled '...[Denby] was sowing thoughts

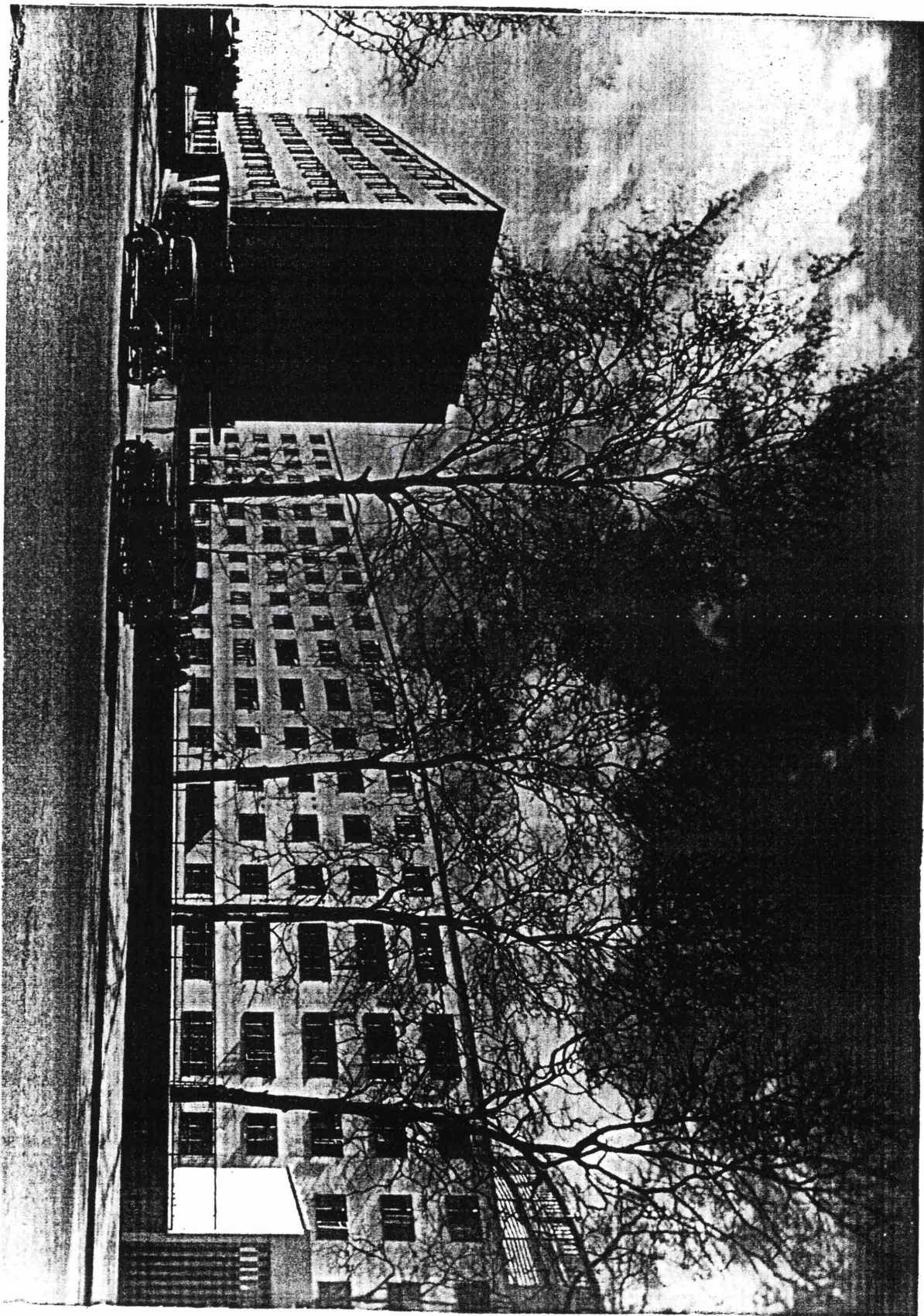
¹¹⁶ No mention was made in the survey of the social facilities or the tenants' committee - this may be because the investigator seems to have been primarily interested in the flats and the use of gas within them.

In 1951, the estate was visited by a government committee investigating living in flats. Many of the complaints made in 1942 resurfaced. Noise was the greatest concern and the grass and allotments were completely mud and neglected. CHAC Sub-Committee on the Social Needs and Problems of People living in flats, set up July 1950 reported December 1951. See CHAC (1952) and Public Records Office papers HLG/37/89 and HLG/37/92.

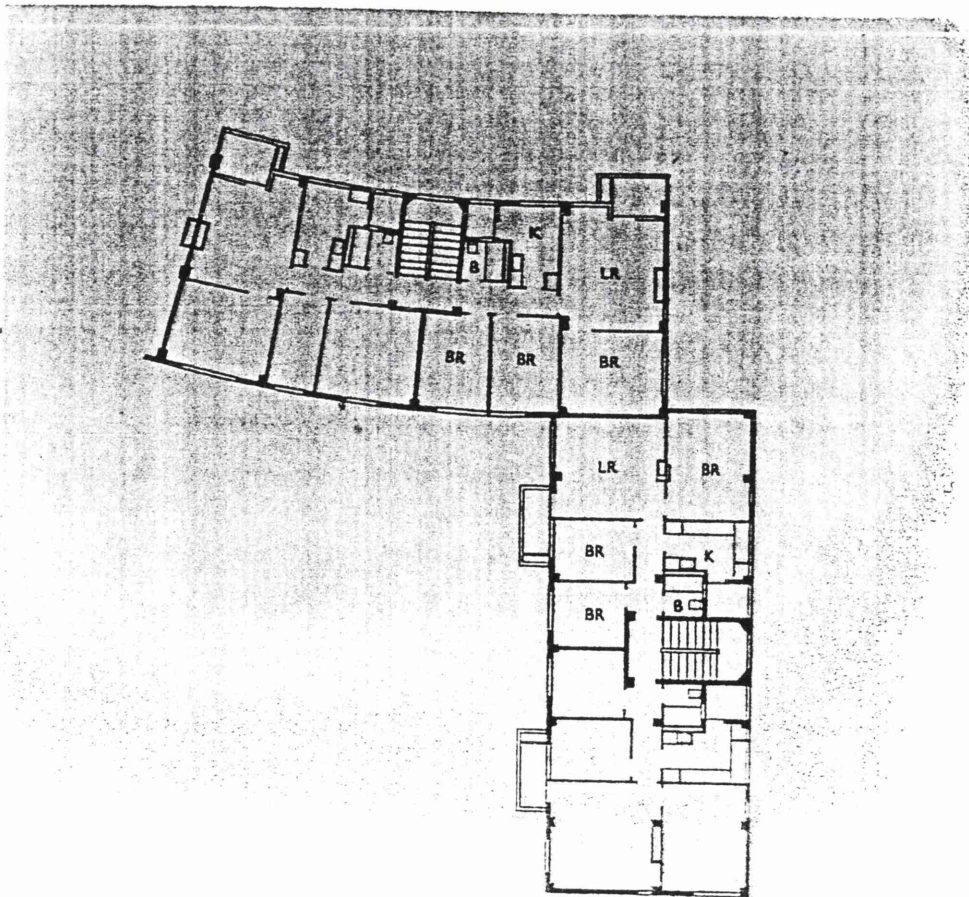
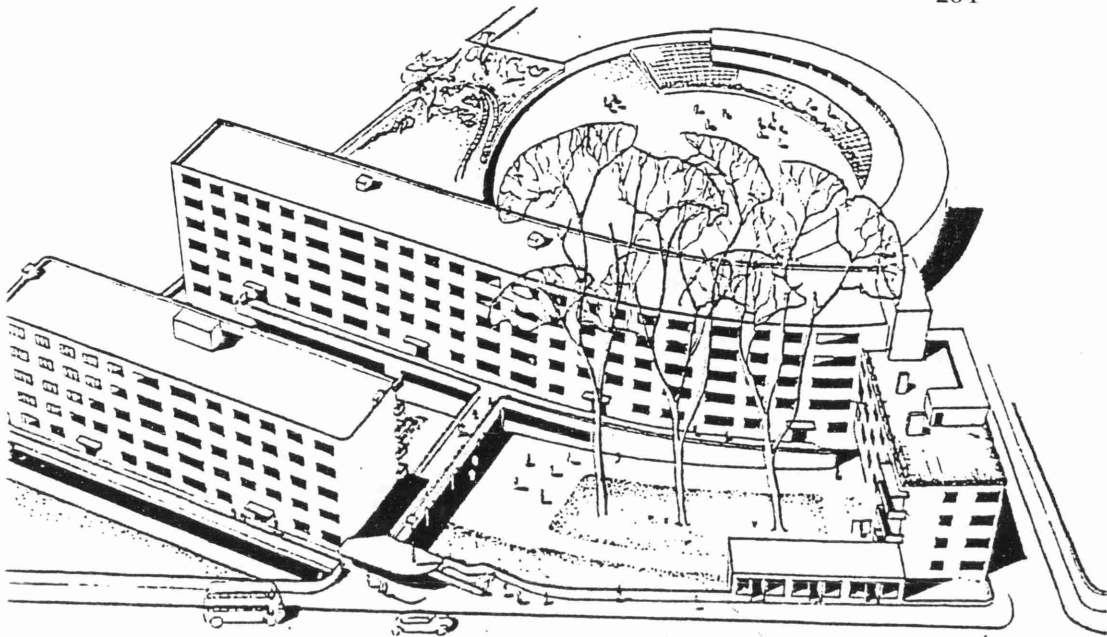
dangerous for the Establishment in the mind of the Prince of Wales'.¹¹⁷

Yet just at the moment when she should have been most happy about the progress of her career she entered a period of crisis both personally and theoretically. From this period, which began during 1936, she emerged with a revised vision of housing and housing consultancy and a new strategy for the rehousing of slum dwellers.

¹¹⁷ Fry (1975), 144.

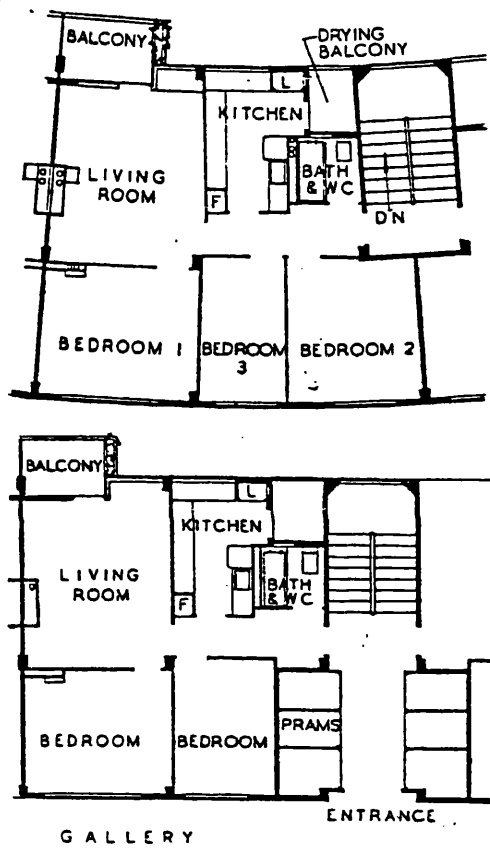


7.1: Kensal House: View from Ladbrooke Grove, 1937

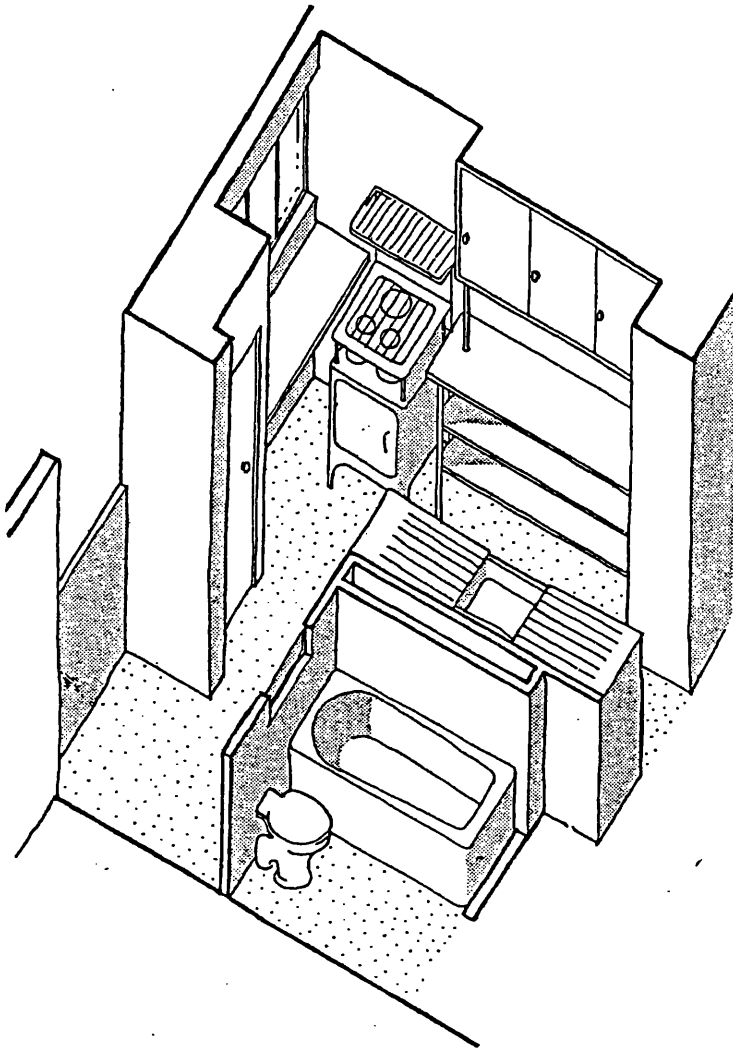


7.2: Kensal House: Perspective

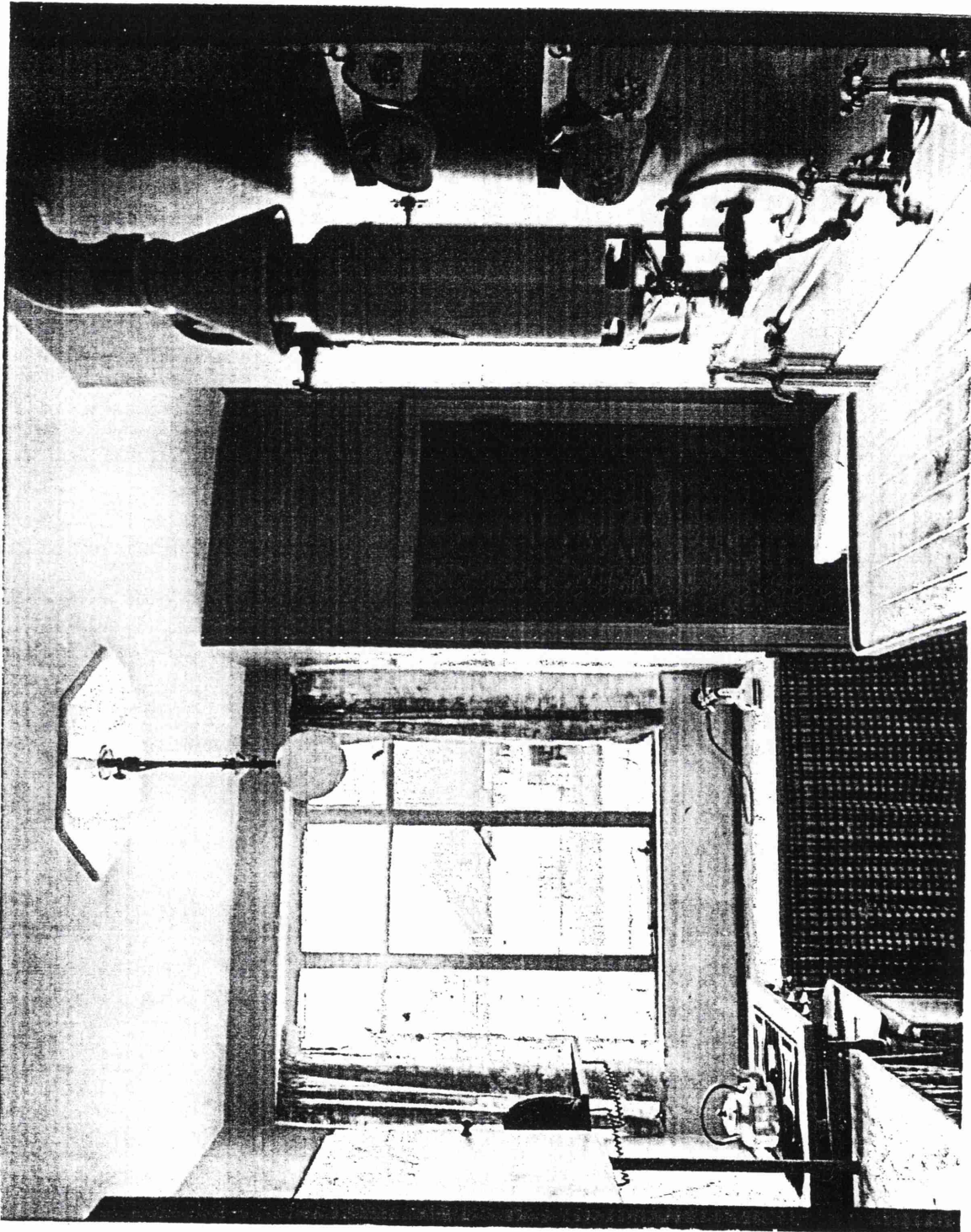
7.3: Kensal House: Block Plan



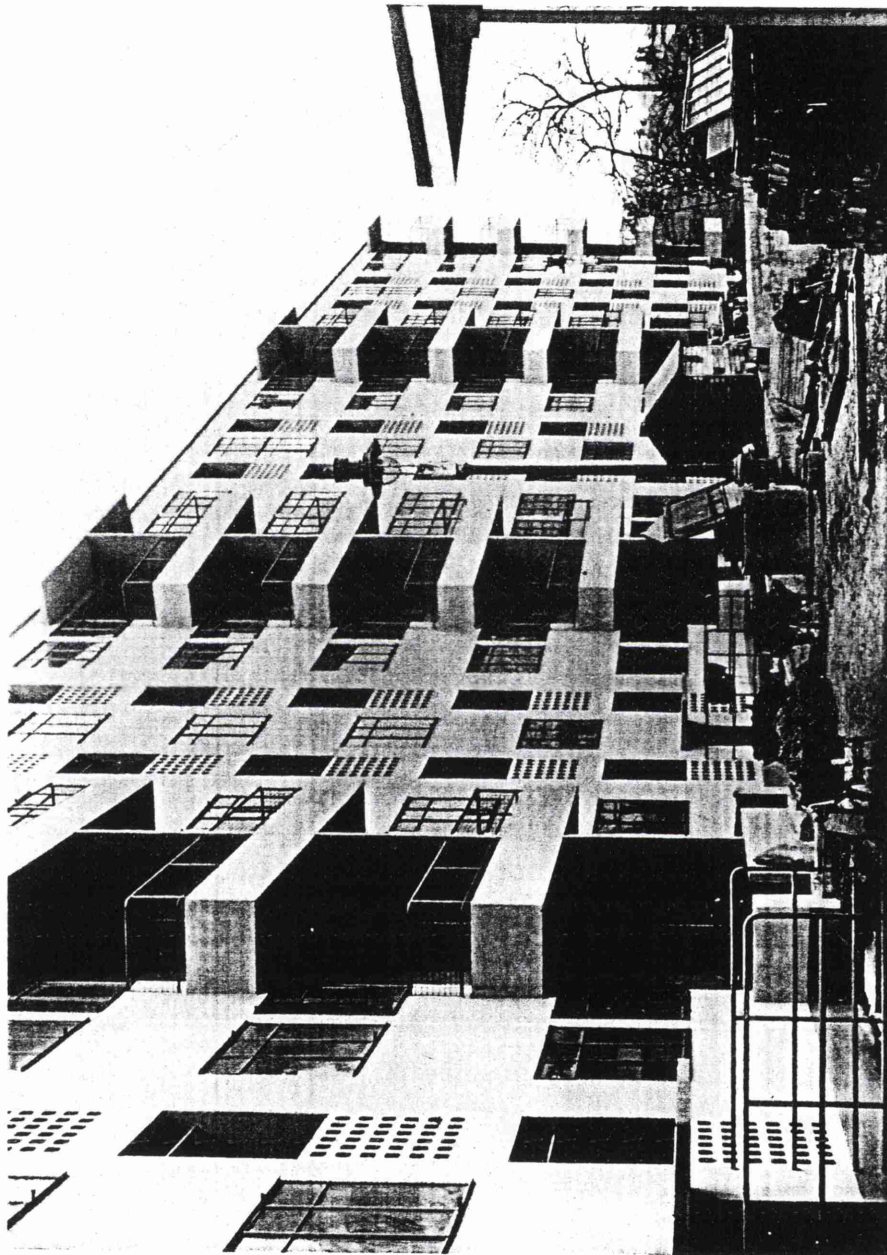
7.4: Kensal House: Flat Plans



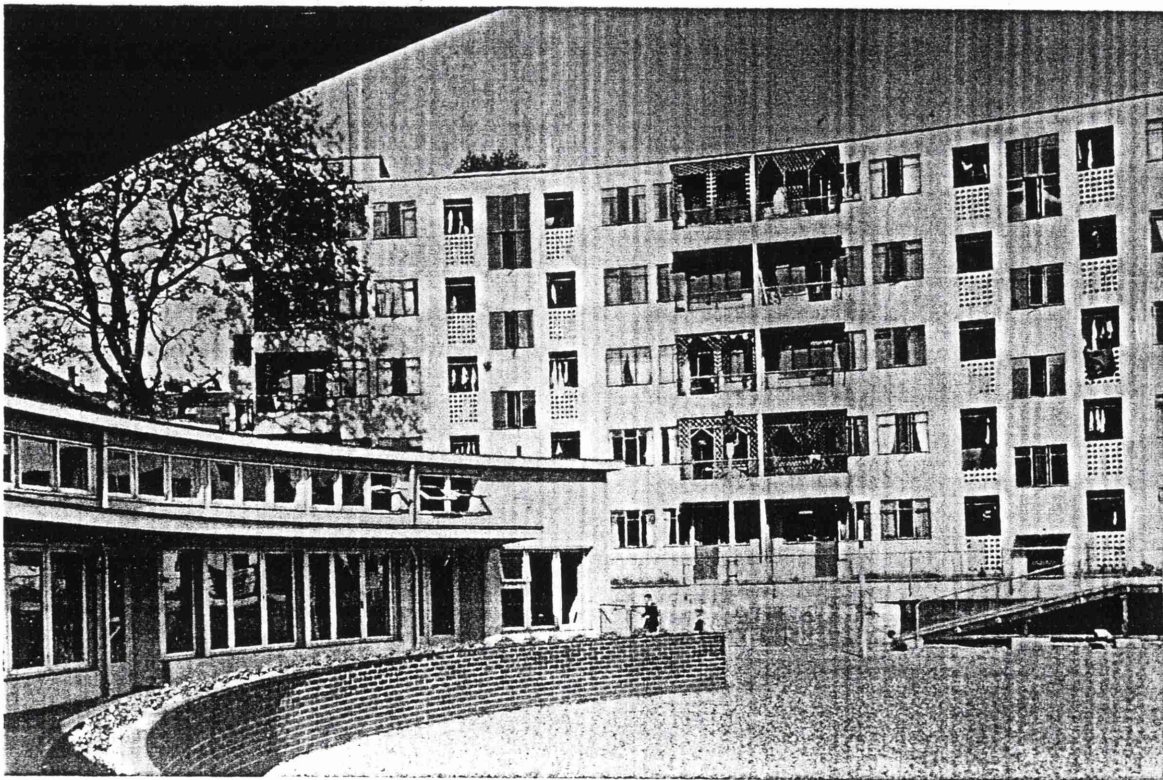
7.5: Kensal House: Bathroom/Kitchen Unit



7.6: Kensal House: View of Kitchen

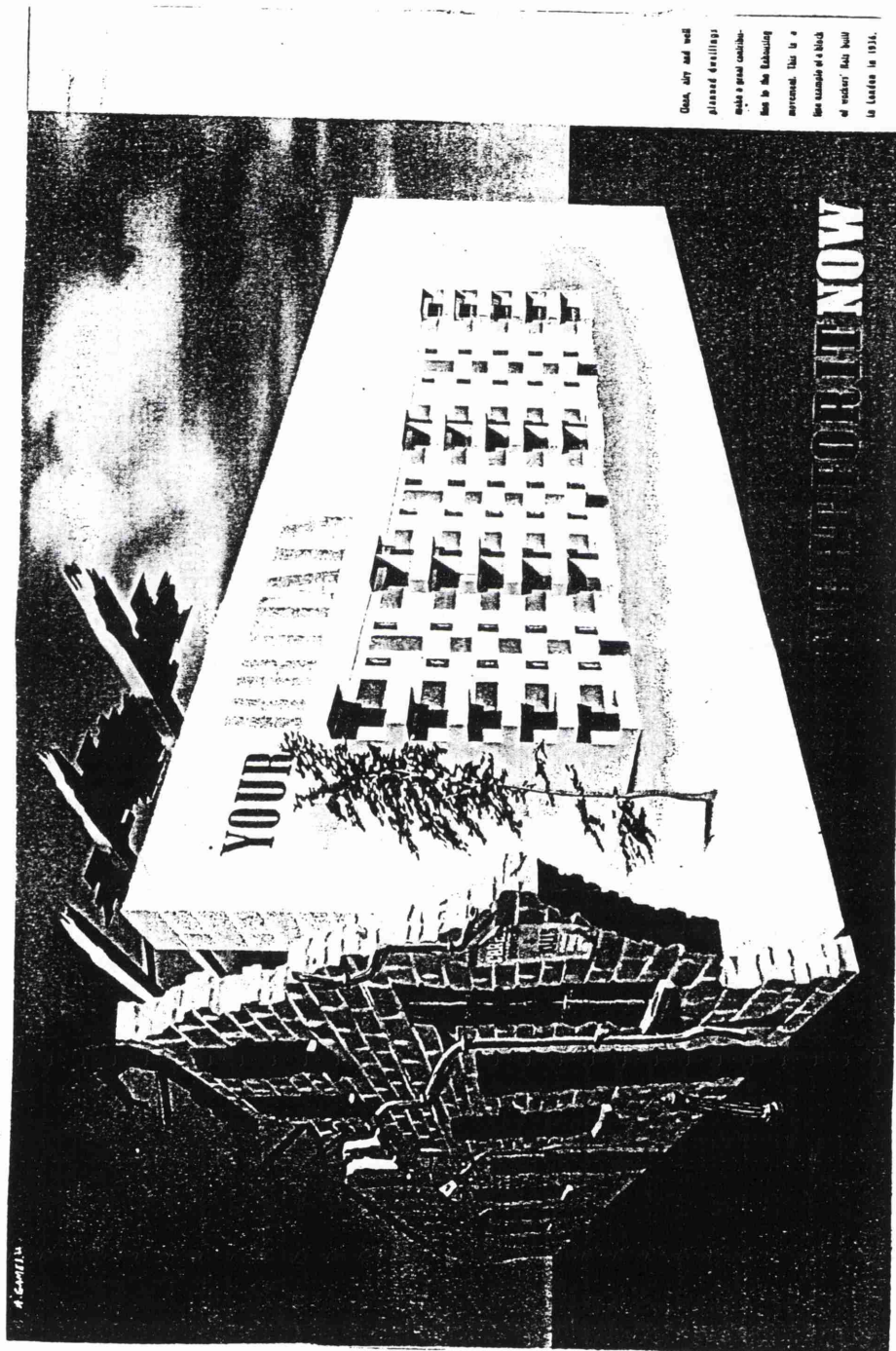


7.7: Kensal House: Drying Balconies and Sun Balconies



7.8: Kensal House: Living Room

7.9: Kensal House: View of Nursery School



7.10: 'Your Britain, Fight for It' poster, Abram Games, 1942



equipment and develop their own groups and societies for sport and study.

THE MARRIED PEOPLE

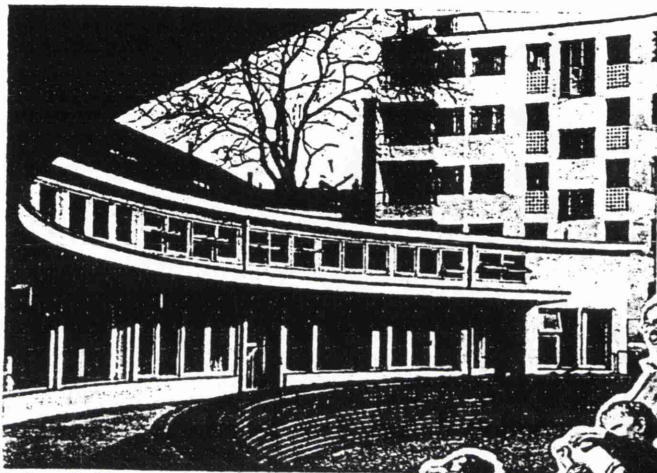
One of the most important features of Kensal House is its social clubrooms, intended primarily for the use of the adult tenants. A large room with stage and snack-bar, smaller rooms simply equipped for making and mending furniture, boot repairing and sewing, will, it is hoped, give full scope for a free social life. Simple washable furnishings in bright red and blue patterns, red-checked oilcloth on the large tables and bright blue benches lend pleasant touches to these rooms.

The opportunity to get out of the house occasionally for a couple of hours is one of the most important factors in keeping home life fresh and peaceful. Here in Kensal House, the housewives have the Nursery School and the Social Club to help them avail themselves of this most necessary break in the day's routine, while the men can come down with their wives for a pleasant social hour or two after the day's work is done.

CLUB MANAGEMENT

The Social Clubs for tenants, their wives and children of all ages will be conducted under the supervision of the Feathers Club. This well-known body has done admirable work in the organisation of non-residential social centres in the poorer districts of London. The existence of tenants' clubs with proper premises in a housing estate is itself a novelty, and the management of such a





The Nursery School front



At Kensal House—
London's latest and most advanced
contribution to working-class dwell-
ing problems, Mr. Therm is busy. Busy providing instant hot
water for every bath and sink—cooking in every kitchen—lighting
every room—heating classrooms and corridors in the Nursery
School. Busy showing, to everyone's satisfaction, that Gas is
the cheapest fuel-on-tap.

THE GAS LIGHT AND COKE COMPANY
never lets London down

HORSEFERRY ROAD, WESTMINSTER, S.W. 1

LOCAL SHOWROOMS:

1/2, THE BROADWAY, WALHAM GREEN, S.W. 6; 30 CHURCH ST., KENSINGTON, W. 8

CHAPTER EIGHT

REHOUSING SLUM DWELLERS: STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW HOME

part three: the modern house

In her first years as an independent consultant Denby had made her name through the design and promotion of the modern flat. During the course of 1936, however, she began to revise this position and in the November of that year in a speech made to the RIBA, she outlined two concepts which would henceforth direct her practice. First, the necessity of a form of dwelling more in keeping with the wishes of those who were to be rehoused. Second, the importance of using this model as a component of larger schemes for the replanning of urban areas so that towns and cities, rather than the rapidly depleting countryside, would be considered a desirable place to live. Over the next three years she would develop these ideas in articles and letters to the press and in her book *Europe Rehoused*, which was published in the Spring of 1938.

Although Denby would still countenance the flat as a form acceptable for family life after 1936, her energies focused on arguing for a reformed house as the basis of any slum clearance policy. She now advocated the construction at high densities of two-storey terraced cottages for families in urban areas. These would form part of mixed-development schemes which would include flats (for the childless, single and elderly) and social amenities. This concept would subsequently be sanctioned by central government in the war years but in the 1930s its advocacy placed her in opposition not just to state policy, but also to most contemporary schools

of thinking on housing and slum clearance, be they modernist or garden city.

Given the scale, and controversy, of Denby's new vision it is not surprising that this model of housing was never fully realised in the 1930s. She did, however, succeed in having built in prototype form one of the houses which were the basis of her scheme. This was the All-Europe House (AEH), shown at the Ideal Home Exhibition of Spring 1939. As a 'virtual' rather than a 'real' project the schemes for mixed-development outlined between 1936 and 1939 could be dismissed as the least significant and successful of all Denby's housing work. Yet it is because of their very virtuality that they are so interesting. Although in these projects Denby sought to resolve the same problems that she had addressed at Sassoon and Kensal Houses, she did so here unencumbered by the demands of a client or collaborator. In the AEH and related projects, then, we see represented Denby's views on housing at their purest.

The unveiling of Denby's preferred model of housing at the end of 1936 marked a watershed in her career. This inaugurated not just a new technique of rehousing but also a revision of the role of the consultant. In place of the sympathetic expert who signified her presence in housing schemes through the adoption of advanced forms of planning and technology there emerged an empathetic expert, a more grassroots-oriented figure who would act as a conduit for the opinions of those who would be rehoused. Denby's concern became to negotiate a middle path between what people wanted and the forms and practices through which they could be enabled to better themselves. Again, this role was signified

in her 'built' work but this time by the adoption of mediated forms of modernism and re-worked versions of the traditional working-class home.

That Denby was able to assume this reconfigured identity can be attributed to the fact that by 1936 new areas of work had begun to open up for her, giving her the financial freedom to work on her housing ideas alone. At the beginning of that year she was appointed to a sub-committee established to investigate the type of furniture and equipment available to the working-class consumer by the government body the Council for Art and Industry (CAI). In a similar vein, she played a central role in the establishment of a shop, House Furnishing Ltd which, under the auspices of the SPHIS, was intended to sell cheap well-designed furniture to the poor. She was also co-opted onto the LCC's Housing and Public Health Committee in the July of 1936.¹ Such work, particularly that which involved governmental bodies, shows how she had achieved a position of considerable authority after only three years of practice. Their belief in her as an individual would, in all likelihood, have given her the confidence to work towards a more independent view of housing than collaboration had allowed. A feeling enhanced, perhaps, by the success of Kensal House in 1937 and the imminent publication of *Europe Rehoused*.

Developments in her personal life, during 1937, may also have encouraged Denby to rethink her position. The first was what would undoubtedly have been a more significant set back in her career had she not had the backing of the CAI and the LCC: the abdication crisis. Quite

¹ Denby retained this position until 1946. See LMA, LCC/MIN/7295-7301.

what Denby's relationship with the Prince of Wales was is not clear but that she advised him, officially or not, about housing seems certain. On his accession to the throne Denby may well have hoped that she might benefit from the patronage of the monarch. Unfortunately, the future king became more interested in Wallis Simpson than in housing and Denby was left without royal support.

This was not the only loss she suffered during 1937. At some stage during that year she and Fry had some kind of dispute which destroyed their partnership and relationship. The only accounts which survive of this split are by Fry but it seems that some event acted as the catalyst to what had been a long-term argument over authorship of their work. For Fry this seems to have been when: '...I failed publicly to acknowledge her and injured us both irreparably'.²

It seems probable that this comment refers to the misattribution of Sassoon House in two major publications which came out in 1937: the Museum of Modern Art's catalogue of its exhibition, 'Modern Architecture in England', and Yorke and Gibberd's *The Modern Flat*. Both carried plates of Sassoon House. Both attributed the scheme to Fry. Neither made any mention of Denby. Instead, *errata* slips naming her as a collaborator were inserted into the books [8.1/8.2].³ Although Denby's work on Sassoon House and Kensal House would have been widely-known at this date and had been acknowledged by most who wrote on these schemes, for her name not to have been cited in two of the major

² Fry (1975), 144.

³ MOMA (1937), between 4-5, and plate 19, published in February. Yorke & Gibberd (1937), 103, published in November.

publications of the day, especially one which had an American audience, was professionally damaging. A slip of paper could not compensate for this oversight.

That the misattribution was the final straw for Denby seems to be confirmed by an extraordinary article Fry contributed to the *Architects' Journal* a month after the publication of *The Modern Flat*. Following a few observations on the nature of social housing, the real purpose of the piece became apparent. Fry stated that he wished '...to establish Elizabeth Denby's contribution to this particular scheme [Sassoon House]'.⁴ That he carried this guilt with him was reflected by his actions in the wake of Denby's death twenty-eight years after their split. He wrote an additional obituary of her for *The Times* because he wanted to 'correct the idea that Elizabeth Denby got Sassoon House and Kensal House through him'.⁵

Other comments by Fry make it clear that this misattribution was only part of the problem between them. The real debate was one I signalled in chapter six: who was really responsible for the design of the flats? As far as Fry was concerned it was he. He wrote of what was 'in the midst of and at the end of all things received of her [Denby], my architecture'.⁶ His authorship of the schemes resided in his translation of ideas through the act of drawing into realisable form. Denby would seem, from what can be inferred from Fry's comments, to have conceptualised authorship in the opposite manner. She owned the schemes because hers were the concepts underlying them; Fry's role was that of amanuensis. Because of this she

⁴ Fry (1937), 948.

⁵ Fry (1965).

⁶ Fry (1975), 144.

felt that she and Fry could enjoy some kind of professional as well as personal partnership, but this was something Fry could or would not concede hence he rejected it, commenting 'she would be my partner and I would not be managed'.⁷

For Fry, Denby's demands and her definition of authorship undermined his status as an architect; especially at a time when architecture had only recently become a legally-protected profession. He could not allow an unqualified person to be given credit for these schemes over him. This struggle between the two combined with what was, in effect, a complete dismissal of her contribution in two major books, could not have been assuaged by Fry's *AJ* article, especially since it fell short of citing her as co-designer. Perhaps the anger which it no doubt generated gave her further impetus to move forward in all areas of her life. The other lesson which she also seems to have taken from this dispute was to ensure that in any future work she undertook, especially in housing, she, and only she, was viewed as its author.

REHOUSING FROM THE SLUM DWELLER'S POINT OF VIEW

On November 16th, 1936 Denby became the first woman to lecture to a sessional meeting of the RIBA, her subject 'Rehousing from the Slum Dweller's Point of View'. The historical nature of this occasion may have been the reason that she took the opportunity to inaugurate the revised version of 'Elizabeth Denby, housing consultant' since it guaranteed her publicity. As its title suggests, Denby's concern in her speech was to describe what those who lived in the subsidised housing built since the

⁷ *Ibid.*


war thought of it for, as she stated, '[the] acid test of the success of these new estates, whether cottages or flats, is to find out what the tenants themselves think of them'.⁸ Her research suggested that the common response was negative and it was this she used as the basis of the first section of her paper in which she '...briefly capitulate[d] the chief complaints as they appear to an impartial observer'.

She began with flats. These, she reported, 'are intensely unpopular among working people, who consider that they provide an environment which is entirely unsuitable for family life'. Denby then listed the six main objections to flats she had gathered. These ranged from the absence of lifts and a private balcony, to lack of sound insulation, ugly architecture and inefficient and inconveniently placed equipment. She describes a visit she made to one block to ask the inhabitants their views where she had to help a mother with pram and baby carry them up the stairs because there were no pram sheds and watched as one woman stood on the edge of her bath in order to feed the gas meter.

A further criticism was the lack of imagination in the use of land around flats. Concrete and asphalt playgrounds, Denby was convinced, were 'a direct encouragement to hooliganism in the child population'. Equally significant was the absence of a garden, or its equivalent '...one and all regretted the days when they had their own bit of back garden and when they could do a bit of joinery, woodwork and hammering, and could grow a few vegetables, working in their garden in the evenings and at the

⁸ Denby's speech and the subsequent discussion were reproduced in the RIBA's *Journal* the week after she spoke. See Denby (1936c). All quotations and paraphrase are taken from this speech until signalled otherwise.

weekend'. She invoked Edward VIII to support her view, noting his intense interest in poverty and that he was a keen gardener.

From a discussion of the problems of flats in central areas Denby turned to the response of tenants to cottage estates. She noted that many of the complaints about 'planning, equipment and over-control' were the same as about flats, but to these could be added many more negative comments. The expense of living at a distance from work was immense, whilst the absence of cheap shopping centres or friendly tradesmen who would give credit added to financial worries and led to scrimping on food. She concluded, '...the lack of recognition of any obligation to the tenants but that of shelter is even more apparent...These fine sounding estates are nothing but a pitiful segregation of the lowest income-level of the population...'. 

She summarised this commentary with the declaration, 'with all my heart I agree with the working man and woman that the choice for a town dweller between a flat at fifty and a cottage at twelve to the acre is a choice between two impractical and unnecessary extremes', adding, 'it is safe to say that opinion generally is overwhelmingly in favour of some form of development which houses the people nearer to their work and nearer to the companionship of the centre of the town'. These observations informed the proposal for an alternative model of housing for slum dwellers which she outlined in the second part of her paper.⁹

⁹ This was discussed briefly in the course of her speech and then elaborated in an addendum to the printed version in the *RIBA Journal*.

Denby proposed 'a close urban development for working people, a mixed development which will bring in the strength of the better-off people to assist the more precariously placed working people, and proper provision for play, for recreation, for health, for fun...[this] is what we really need.'

Constructed in central areas, such schemes would comprise terraced cottages for families built at high densities alongside flats, of varying densities, with planned provision for social needs.

Denby did not elaborate on the form or precise densities of the flats, nor the type of social amenities to be included. The illustration of her talk (and text) with two views of the Pioneer Health Centre gave, however, an idea of what she envisaged in this respect. Her main focus at this date was instead on her proposal for terraced cottages which 'at a density of 40 dwellings to the acre (net)...could be built on land normally developed at the same density in flats, at considerably higher constructional costs [8.3]. They would also be preferred to semi-detached cottages on the outskirts of a town, involving fares to work'. These three-bedroomed houses, of approximately 800 square feet, with garden and vegetable plot would, she said, be more appreciated by poor families than a flat. Furthermore, 'as a woman in touch with working women [this scheme] I feel embodies things which are important to working people and discards things which are unimportant, such things, for example, as wide roads for motor cars which are not very much used in a working-class district'.

The high density of development would be possible she argued, rather vaguely, by careful attention to site replanning. Reduction of road width would free up space; as would the use of flats for the childless or the

unmarried. She also noted that the average density of Britain's cities was comparatively-low yet many areas within them overcrowded. Her implication was that with careful demolition and zoning of use, particularly of industry, existing populations could be redistributed within the urban area to allow the density of housing she proposed. And, given the likelihood of a decreasing population the continued creation of new suburbs would, she said, be a waste of money. In twenty years time they would be unoccupied and the countryside irreparably destroyed.

THE RESPONSE TO DENBY'S SPEECH

Bobby Carter's description of the evening - 'All her guns blazed against the establishment right and left. The occasion was one which those who were present remember with a shudder' - gives some idea of the impact Denby's speech had.¹⁰ The text of the ensuing discussion also suggests an audience shellshocked by what Denby had proposed. As the President of the RIBA, Percy Thomas, noted in opening the debate 'I cannot imagine any mere man having the courage to stand up here and tell us that the work of our architects and social reformers is in the wrong direction'. He described her speech as 'interesting and provocative' before handing over to Lewis Silkin, MP and chair of the LCC's Housing Committee, for a vote of thanks.¹¹ He would be the first of many detractors who responded to Denby that night.

Although Silkin began by thanking Denby for her 'very charming, interesting, and perhaps somewhat provocative address' and acknowledged that some criticism of slum clearance work was justifiable,

¹⁰ Carter (1965).

¹¹ All quotations are taken from Denby (1936c) until indicated otherwise.

he very quickly changed his tone and sought to correct many of Denby's statistics and conclusions. His criticisms were no doubt influenced by the fact that she was a recently co-opted member of the LCC's Housing Committee and her speech coincided with the announcement by the Council of a major scheme of flats at White City.

Silkin commented '...we are very glad to have her on that [Housing] Committee. I am sure she will teach us a good many things, but I am equally sure that we are going to teach her a good many things. I am afraid that she is going to come face to face with the practical side of this problem'. He went on to point out the high cost of land which required high-density flat development; the fact that it was impossible to rehouse all existing populations on cleared sites, hence the need for suburban development, and the choices which had to be made in central areas between playgrounds for children and gardens for adults. Like many that evening Silkin also challenged Denby's argument for housing at forty to the acre in central areas, commenting: 'I do not know what the town planning authorities and the Ministry of Health are going to say to that!'. His rough calculations he said, were that her scheme could produce houses of only 350 square feet, over half the size of current standards. He concluded by reminding himself that he was supposed to be proposing a vote of thanks to Denby and said that her greatest contribution that evening was that her speech had made him think.

Of the eight other participants in the discussion who are reported as speaking all but two echoed Silkin's comments. Archibald Scott, Chief Architect at the Ministry of Health, remarked that at forty houses per acre

'we must tell her that she is going too far'. It was left to Mr B.S.Hume, ARIBA, to praise Denby. 'I felt that we had...the speech of an idealist, voicing the very real dissatisfaction which most of us feel with the way town planning is being carried out. We had against that speech two official apologies [Silkin and Scott]. I do not know what effect they had on other people, but they did not sound very convincing to me'.

Despite the lack of support, Denby in her reply stuck to her argument though she acknowledged that she had been '...perhaps critical to a tactless degree'. She concluded:

I am quite unrepentant about this, because for some quite extraordinary reason we seem to have forgotten the beauty of a closely planned urban development in England. I have been all over Europe and I have looked at the housing estates abroad and I have found nothing to compare with the ordered development, the regard given to every kind of life - the poor, the rich, the better off - which you find in a town of our best English period.

As well as the criticisms she faced on the evening of her speech Denby also attracted further attention and reaction from the press and others in the weeks after it. Some, like the *News Chronicle*, stressed the novelty of a woman's view of housing, others, like *The Times*, offered a more straightforward summary of her speech.¹² The weekly architectural papers all commented on what Denby had done. The *AJ*, the *Builder* and the *Architect and Building News* took the line that hers was a valid point of view, although the latter noted that 'One wished that Miss Denby had fortified her position more securely before launching her attack on such redoubtable opponents as Mr Silkin and Mr Archibald Scott'.¹³ Again it was her suggestion of forty to the acre densities which was criticised. A

¹² *News Chronicle* (1936), *The Times* (1936).

¹³ *AJ* 1936), *B* (1936b), *ABN* (1936), 214.

correspondent to the *AJ*, whilst sympathetic to Denby's case, wrote that according to his calculations it would be more realistic to build houses at twenty or twenty five to the acre [8.4].¹⁴

The extent of the coverage of Denby's speech caused one particularly interesting protest against her. In a letter dated 28th November, 1936, a Miss Alma Dicker wrote to the chair of the RIBA's women member's committee, Gertrude Leverkus, to complain about Denby having made the speech. Dicker was concerned that Denby had been described in the press as an architect, commenting '[she] is not a member of the Institute, nor, to the best of my knowledge has she received the training necessary for an architect. I should like to know why a Woman member of the Institute was not asked to deliver this lecture, as I feel there is at least one who is equally, if not more capable, viz: Miss Ledeboer'.¹⁵

Dicker's disapprobation of Denby was unusual amongst women architects. Ledeboer, for example, rallied to Denby's aid to work through the density issue.¹⁶ Similarly, the Women's Committee's simply ignored Dicker's letter by passing it on to the RIBA's publicity department and no further action appears to have been taken.¹⁷ The letter was clearly a one-off but it does indicate how Denby's lack of formal qualifications could be used against her as a means to undermine her authority.

One other figure within the architectural profession attempted to offer

¹⁴ Tickle (1936).

¹⁵ RIBA Archives: Women Member's Committee papers. Box 1/ folder 3.

¹⁶ Baker (1996). Ledeboer's influence was subsequently reflected in the lower densities ED included in her revised version of the scheme for the Ideal Home Exhibition, see below.

¹⁷ RIBA Archives: Women Member's Committee papers, secretary's minutes, folder 1, 3.12.36.

Denby support for her ideas, Arthur Trystan Edwards, the founder and leader of the Hundred New Towns Association (HNT). In his 'manifesto', *A Hundred New Towns for Britain*, issued in 1934, he declared that this 'new fraternity' would campaign for the construction of a hundred new towns across Britain in order 'to solve the slum problem, give creative employment, save the countryside, make an A1 population'. His proposals were essentially for a more dense form of garden city. He envisaged 'compact townships' which incorporated industry and residential areas with housing at twenty to the acre, populated by a mix of classes. These new towns would, he argued, enable large numbers of the existing population in towns to be decanted, thereby solving the problem of overcrowding. Those who were left behind could then be rehoused on similar lines. Such ideas, Edwards claimed, were very popular amongst the working classes.¹⁸

By 1936 Edwards had issued a revised set of proposals which were displayed at an exhibition held at the Housing Centre in the fortnight before Denby's speech. Called 'Forbidden Houses', it showed plans for compact townships containing houses, many in back-to-back formation, built at densities of between thirty and one hundred per acre [8.5].¹⁹ The coincidence of an exhibition which advocated high-density urban planning with a speech by Denby which appeared to take a similar line seems to have led Edwards to write to the *RIBA Journal* partly to re-state the case for the HNT and assert his prior ownership of high-density planning but also to try and bring Denby's position in line with the

¹⁸ Edwards (1934).

¹⁹ B (1936a). These ideas were expanded further in a series of articles in *The Builder*, see Edwards (1938).

Association.

In this letter he stressed that he and Denby shared the view that the 'most *popular* solution of the housing problem lies in the provision of high-density cottages in street or quadrangular formation'. Their only difference of opinion, and it is Edward's implication that this was simply a matter of degree, was about the rate of density and the ultimate purpose of such development. Edwards argued that Denby could not combine houses at forty to the acre with gardens of the size she proposed. If towns were to be made sufficiently compact to preserve the countryside then gardens had to be sacrificed, replaced by roof gardens. This would free the space which would allow development at the even higher densities he proposed. Such proposals, he concluded, would work only if they formed part of what he believed was the real solution to the housing problem, '*urban decentralisation*'.²⁰

It was Edwards' insistence on a decentralist policy which led Denby to issue a firm rebuttal of his advances in the next issue of the *Journal*. She went to great lengths to dissociate herself from the HNT: '...in essentials my policy is entirely opposed to theirs and has been since the formation of the Association'. She continued 'Surely the sensible and practical thing to do is to replan existing towns in conformity with the needs and wishes of all sections and all income levels before considering the formation of new ones?'. She finished 'Mr Edwards and his Association urge "*urban decentralisation*". I urge "*urban replanning*"'.²¹

²⁰ Edwards (1936).

²¹ Denby (1936d).

Edwards made one final attempt to win Denby over the HNT's side, writing: 'I am sorry that Miss Denby will not allow us to welcome her as an ally in our efforts...'. It was to no avail. She reiterated her rejection of the Association's principles '...I consider that, in fundamentals, I am entirely in disagreement with them'.²²

PLANNING DEBATES IN THE 1930s

The amount of interest aroused by Denby's speech and the robust debate between her and Edwards in the pages of the RIBA's *Journal* was an enactment on a small scale of the much larger debate being carried on at that time about the future direction town and country planning should take in Britain. Planning had not been a dormant issue in the inter-war period but it did assume a new urgency in the wake of the Depression and the realisation that Britain's industrial areas had entered a period of decline from which they would not recover. At the same time, there was renewed concern about the expansion of population into rural areas as speculative builders converted farmland into suburbia at the rate of 25 thousand hectares per annum.²³ The passage of the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act and the creation of Special Areas in the country's former industrial heartlands signalled to many in the planning movement and related areas that central government was now taking planning seriously. The time was ripe for interest groups to promote their particular approach to the restructuring of Britain's urban and rural areas.

Dennis Hardy has noted that it was the GCTPA which was particularly adept at using this new anxiety about the nation's industrial decline as the

²² Edwards (1937), Denby (1937a).

²³ Hebbert (1980), 28.

opportunity to step up its campaign for the building of garden cities. The clear indications that population, industry and business were moving away from the old industrial cities demonstrated, in its view, that the garden city was the most appropriate model for the emerging economic landscape.²⁴

When F.J.Osborn, a passionate advocate of garden cities, became the Association's new Secretary in 1936 the campaign became even more concerted. He issued a new statement of policy in which he urged the necessity of 'an immediate check to the growth of London and other overgrown towns coupled with a definite policy of decentralisation...into new towns of the garden city type...'. He also criticised the building of 'high flats and tenements...[which] accentuate rather than solve the problems of slum life...while providing an environment entirely unsuited to family life'.²⁵ As the organisation which dominated the planning profession and had already enjoyed a significant influence over central government policy, the signs were that the GCTPA's approach to planning would prevail. Yet, it was not without its opponents. Hardy argues that one of the reasons that Osborn restated the GCTPA's position was that by 1936 a discernible body of opinion against its approach had emerged.

This was not a coherent movement in any sense. It incorporated a range of opinions from British modernists' re-working of European ideas on urban replanning to Edwards' mixture of compact urban renewal and new towns. The one view which held such different people together, at least from the GCTPA's standpoint, was an antagonism towards the low-density

²⁴ Hardy (1991), ch.4.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 206.

of the developments it proposed. It was perhaps because of the movement's diversity that Denby positioned herself within it. Its status as an opposition movement would attract publicity while its variety ensured she could occupy a distinct space of her own whilst also benefiting from an association with a larger grouping. Indeed, it seems possible that one of the reasons she became increasingly vocal in her advocacy of urban renewal at this date was because it had gained in popularity.

Denby's anti-decentralist position did, in fact, represent something of a turnabout on her part since a little earlier she appears to have adhered to GCTPA principles. In April 1934 in a discussion about the planning of London she had argued that its surplus population should have been decanted into planned satellite towns rather than being left to settle in unregulated suburbia.²⁶ The early NHFO exhibitions had also emphasised the garden-city approach. By the end of 1934, however, her work at Sassoon House was reflecting what would become her new stance, a fierce attachment to urban renewal which would last for the rest of her life.

What led to this shift to a pro-urban stance can only be inferred from her writings and practice. Her own preference for city life at its most urban and urbane revealed in her frequent invocation of the Georgian city in her writing and her choice of home, suggest someone predisposed to advocating city dwelling.²⁷ She was also, as she often stated, aware that workers needed to live close to their place of work and liked to have access to places of entertainment and leisure. They also preferred to live in houses. As far as Denby seems to have been concerned it was possible to

²⁶ Denby (1934c).

²⁷ For most of her adult life Denby lived in Georgian houses in central London.

meet these needs in a modern way not by abandoning the city and starting again but by re-planning the city to preserve its positive elements and through the relocation or removal of its negative aspects.

There are also sufficient similarities between Denby's ideas and those of others in the anti-GCTPA movement to suggest some degree of influence, or cross-influence, on her work. One probable source was the town planner and pro-urbanist Thomas Sharp. Described by Gordon Cherry as 'a somewhat difficult man...rejected by many in his day', Sharp occupied a position on the outside very like Denby's and shared her ability to write fiercely critical prose.²⁸ There is no evidence that they had met at this date but it seems unlikely that Denby would not have been aware of his work nor he of hers.²⁹

Sharp's clearest statement of his urbanist views was made in his 1932 book, *Town and Countryside*. His main theme was that:

There is the town. There is the country. Two pure and separate forms, each capable of supreme beauty as a work of art; each serving since civilization itself, two instinctive desires of man

The Industrial Revolution and 'a flabby, shoddy, romantic nature-worship' had combined to destroy both.³⁰ This would, he feared, continue, especially given the dominance of garden-city thinking, something about which he was particularly vituperative: 'Howard's new hope, Town-Country, is a hermaphrodite; sterile imbecile, a monster; abhorrent and loathsome to the Nature which he worships'.³¹ The way forward, he

²⁸ Cherry (1981), 10.

²⁹ They did meet when in 1942 Denby gave evidence to the Scott Committee on which Sharp served. PRO/HLG/80/124, records Denby's interview with him on 27.3.42.

³⁰ Sharp (1932), 43 & 11.

³¹ *Ibid*, 143.

argued, was to preserve, not blur, the distinction between town and country.

His suggestions are fascinating given Denby's later ideas and rhetoric. For both areas he advocated the close grouping of buildings. Considering the design of the town he asked 'surely the ideal town is one which is as compact as the minimum requirements of public health will allow' and cited the 18th century town as the exemplar of this model.³² He concluded, 'surely, then, it is our business to maintain the beauty that is the countryside and to create a new and a different beauty in towns that will be worthy of us'.³³ This seems to be what Denby tried to do throughout the 1930s, though it would not be until 1936 that she met Sharp's criteria completely.

That Denby was attracted by Sharp's ideas seems probable but cannot be proved. A more certain link may be made to the other main group of urbanists at this date, her colleagues in the MARS Group. In their earliest work on urban planning, produced for NHFO 1934, MARS members had not really addressed the form a re-planned city could take; although their decision to focus their analysis on an area of London does suggest a predisposition towards centralised rather than decentralised planning. It was not until early 1936 that a more concerted effort was made in this area with the establishment of a town-planning sub-committee to prepare for CIAM V the following year. Denby seems to have played an initial role in setting up this committee, reporting its activities to the Central Executive Committee (CEC) in February 1936, but after this is not recorded as

³² *Ibid*, 149.

³³ *Ibid*, 162.

attending the sub-committee's meetings.³⁴ Her membership of the CEC would, however, have meant that she was in touch with its work.

The sub-committee comprised Hugh de Cronin Hastings, editor of the *Architectural Review*, and the architects William and Aileen Tatton Brown who, according to John Gold, carried out most of the work over the next year and a half.³⁵ The resulting scheme, 'The Theory of Contacts and its application to the future of London' had clear resonances with Denby's work. First, in defining the city 'as centres that facilitated human contacts of all types - whether intellectual, social or commercial' the Browns shared with her the idea that cities should be viewed as diverse and stimulating places.³⁶ Secondly, aspects of their scheme to re-plan London show clear similarities to the techniques Denby deployed in hers.

The Browns proposed a linear city of thirteen strips which led out of London into the surrounding countryside [8.6]. Though it is doubtful whether Denby would have approved of a scheme which encroached into rural land, the Brown's proposals for the urban communities which would be focused around these strips do seem likely to have appealed to her. They proposed neighbourhood units as the basic building block of urban development. Each would be a mile long and contain dwellings, amenities and some form of industry [8.7]. The accommodation comprised a mixture of terraced houses, villas and flats to cater for all the classes which would dwell in each neighbourhood. Like Denby, then, the Browns envisaged a form of town planning which would reintegrate the classes in

³⁴ Minutes for 15.2.36, SaG/90/3.

³⁵ Gold (1997), 145-163. I rely heavily on his discussion for this section.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 147.

one area but unlike her, they seem (and it is unclear in Gold's narrative if this is his interpretation or a paraphrase of the Brown's ideas) to have distributed the housing on a class basis. The workers would live in flats; the middle and upper classes in houses.

That the Browns should have included houses in their scheme is nevertheless interesting for these were frowned on by the majority of the MARS Group. Fry commented 'houses-with-gardens had no place then in our view of the future', a view which would prevail when the MARS Plan for London was being prepared between 1938 and 1942.³⁷ Though its authors drew on the Browns' 1937 scheme, particularly in the adoption of the linear city form, its accommodation was all in high flats. By sharing the Browns' attachment to the house, then, Denby placed herself in a marginal position within the MARS Group and, significantly, against Fry, suggesting her growing disenchantment with a dogmatic modernism. For Fry and the majority of MARS members the high flat may have been the signifier through which they connoted their modernity, but it was a form unpopular with the working-class families who would inhabit them. Therefore, as far as Denby seems to have been concerned, it should not be used for them, though it was acceptable for those without families.

For Denby mixed-development planning was the device through which she could create a form of urban renewal. It also allowed her, I suggest, to fulfil her theory of housing more completely than she had hitherto been able and to do so in a way that was sufficiently different from the norm for her to be attributed with its 'invention'.

³⁷ Fry cited in *ibid*, 151.

In her travels to research *Europe Rehoused*, Denby had seen the satellite cities outside Paris where accommodation was provided for all classes. She had written approvingly of these schemes in 1934, stating that she thought such cohabitation was 'of vital importance' since it exposed the poor to the better example of middle-class values.³⁸ Since both Sassoon and Kensal House were necessarily single-class schemes this aspect of her theory had been unrealisable. Now, working on a theoretical basis, she could ensure such exposure was possible by including, though she did not elaborate how, accommodation for both the poor and better-off sections of the urban community within the same area. The fact that in her description of the scheme she also made reference to the siting of industry and leisure amenities meant that she fulfilled another concern of 1934, that slum clearance should form part of the replanning of whole cities.³⁹

The mixed-development schemes she saw in Europe also supplied Denby with the architectural and spatial forms through which she could modernise the ideals of planning she had discussed in the early 1930s.⁴⁰ Her attachment to the Georgian city has already been noted. This she championed for its architectural form - the use of the house as the basic unit of design - its compact planning and its social organisation. She commented: 'until we had the prosperity of the Industrial Revolution, an English town had a close warm structure, embodying all income levels, all professions, all types; they supported each other, they had mutual respect'.⁴¹

³⁸ Denby (1934d).

³⁹ Denby (1934c).

⁴⁰ Denby (1933b). Matless (1998), 25 (and *passim*), has noted how the desire 'to plan a landscape simultaneously modern and traditional...' was a common concern amongst progressive reformers at this date.

⁴¹ Denby (1936c).

However much Denby may have admired the Georgian model, her need to signify her presence in the design process meant that it was not in her interest to simply imitate the structure and style of that model. Instead, she borrowed from Europe the modern forms which fulfilled the same aims. In both Paris and Stockholm she saw the combination of houses with high flats which she would adopt in her 1936 scheme. From Stockholm in particular she seems to have been inspired by the use of terraced housing for workers; the modern equivalent of the lower-rate Georgian terraced house. What Denby did not take from the French and Swedish models was their satellite or suburban location. Hers was resolutely a scheme for urban replanning, hence the attraction of the Georgian town plan. If she was looking for a more up-to-date version of this then she would have found it in another city she visited: Amsterdam. There cottages had been built at thirty to the acre in central areas.

Mixed development was, then, Denby's preferred model of housing allowing her to combine her interest in both social and architectural planning. It was an unusual, though not unique, approach for the period and as such provides important new evidence to push back the date at which the concept was first actively promoted in Britain. Until now historians have dated its initial advocacy to the war years and either not considered the 1930s,⁴² or noted only that it was during this decade that people became aware of the concept from European practice.⁴³

⁴² Viz: Bullock (1987) and Owens (1987).

⁴³ Glendinning & Muthesius (1994), 29 cite, interestingly, Denby's *Europe Rehoused* as the source for this awareness.

A NEW MODEL OF CONSULTANCY

Denby's speech of 1936 was noteworthy because it brought to the attention of a significant public the concept of the mixed development, as well as defining her as a determined pro-urbanist. It also introduced a revised version of consultancy to her audience. This was most evident in the emphasis Denby placed throughout the speech on reporting the views of the ordinary working person and how she located her advocacy of the house over the flat in terms of its appeal to workers. Another new element in the speech was Denby's reference to her gender - 'as a woman in touch with working women' - a rhetorical style not evident in her previous work. She even began to refer to her background. At one point she stated 'speaking as a north country woman'.

Quite what led her to this public identification with working people is not clear. Her work in north Kensington would, it seems more than likely, have made her familiar with the opinions of those trapped in slum accommodation yet a rehearsal of these views did not form part of her writings of the early 1930s. What might have led her to take a grassroots rather than a top-down approach to rehousing?

The opposition of her new approach to that of the establishment may have encouraged Denby to side with the one set of people likely to approve of what she was now doing: workers. It was also a stance sufficiently different from the one she had previously taken that she might use it as a trademark. One possible explanation may also be found in the shifting nature of contemporary political practice, particularly that of the left-wing labour movement of which Denby was a member.

During the 1930s, in the wake of the Depression and the rise of fascism the philosophy of Popular Front politics came to dominate the labour groups with which Denby was associated. This stressed that the way forward was for the working and middle classes to combine in the fight against capitalism and fascism. Denby's own party, the ILP, set up a joint front against fascism with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1934 for example.⁴⁴ Friends recall that Denby did consider joining the CPGB, suggesting that her sympathies were becoming increasingly worker-oriented.⁴⁵

Denby's new stance could then be understood as the attempt of a middle-class woman to work with working-class people against one manifestation of capitalism: bad housing. Some of her associates had already initiated what might be called a Popular Front against the slums by forming ATO in early 1935. She would have known its founder Lubetkin from their joint membership of MARS and though she did not join ATO she did publicly support it.⁴⁶ Its activities may have inspired her to follow a similar path.

Popular Front politics may also have encouraged Denby to seek particular forms of cultural expression closer to working-class taste than the modernism of Sassoon or Kensal House. This was something that the Artists' International Association (AIA), formed in 1933 as a Popular Front movement of painters had sought to do in the field of art and photography.⁴⁷ Its members included Misha Black, MARS' member and

⁴⁴ Morris & Radford (1983), 28.

⁴⁵ Allen (1995). Denby did not join.

⁴⁶ Her name is listed amongst the supporters of ATO's 1936 'An Exhibition on Working-Class Housing' alongside Fry, Thomas Sharp *inter alia*. ATO (1936), 1.

⁴⁷ Radford (1987).

amongst its offshoots was ATO, so it seems likely that Denby would have been aware of AIA activity.⁴⁸

In their desire to democratise the consumption of art, AIA members sought to develop styles more in tune with proletarian taste. Most adopted various forms of realism in place of the abstraction then dominant in avant-garde circles. In this light, Denby's decision to design a house rather than a flat, and to have it built in a modernised Georgian style, as I shall discuss in my section on the AEH later in this chapter, could be seen as a deliberate attempt to find an architectural equivalent of realism.⁴⁹ A traditional dwelling form built from traditional materials would be more legible to its working-class inhabitants than the concrete surfaces and alien spaces of modernism.

Denby may also have been encouraged to address the issue of working-class taste as a result of her involvement, from early 1936 onwards, in two projects which attempted to resolve the problem of the furnishing and equipment of the working-class dwelling with affordable and well-designed objects: a sub-committee of the government body, the Council for

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴⁹ I would like to acknowledge Powers (1999) for sparking the idea of Denby as a social realist in my mind.

Art and Industry (CAI),⁵⁰ and a shop set up by the SPHIS called House Furnishing Ltd (HFL) of which she became Managing Director and chief buyer.⁵¹ The attempt to bring mass markets into contact with 'good design' represented by both these schemes formed part of a particular strand within what LeMahieu has described as the search for a 'culture for democracy' which took place in the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than reject or protest against the rise of the new technologies of the mass media and mass production, LeMahieu distinguishes the set of intellectuals who embraced technology because they believed it could be the medium through which taste could be uplifted.⁵² So just as Reith's BBC could bring high literary culture to the masses through the wireless play, so too could the CAI bring 'high design' to the masses by introducing the principles of 'good design' to mass production.⁵³

The nature of the designed objects promoted by organisations like the CAI and HFL reflected their concern to unite high culture and technology. They do not seem to have believed that new technologies necessitated

⁵⁰ Denby was initially recruited to a preliminary investigation set up by Frank Pick, the CAI's chairman, to carry out an 'artistic and sociological investigation' into 'what is the cost of furnishing and equipping a workman's cottage or flat and to ascertain whether articles of good design at reasonable prices are indeed available'. It was Denby's task to make a collection of the sort of furniture which a working-class person might be able to buy, a budget was set of forty pounds. Following the display of this collection in May 1936 it was decided that a more thorough investigation should be held and a formal committee, the Committee on the Working-Class Dwelling: its furnishing and equipment, was created with Denby amongst its members. It made further collections of furniture and in May 1937 issued a report and in June, an exhibition of approved furniture was held at the Building Centre in London. PRO BT57/a191/35. See CAI (1937), for a review of the exhibition 'M.R.' (1937) and for a general account of the CAI, Farr (1955).

⁵¹ The idea for a shop to provide 'good, strong, serviceable and well-designed furniture and fabrics', *Housing Happenings* (1936), was first mooted in December 1935 (minutes of SPHIS, 17.12.35). Denby was appointed amongst its first Directors in February 1936; the shop opened the following April (closing in Spring 1941). Minutes of HFL, 27.2.36. SPHA Archives.

⁵² LeMahieu (1988), 2.

⁵³ *Ibid*, part 2.

new forms rather than the application of technologies could bring long-tested traditions of design to a much wider market. Indeed, LeMahieu notes that such technologies were praised because they could revive traditions which might otherwise have perished; a wireless programme could record dialects under threat from the (perceived) Americanisation of English culture or, in this case, traditional English furniture styles or types could be absorbed into factory production.⁵⁴ The concern was not to dictate taste but to uplift it, to expose people to a more refined version of what they were used to.

Thus, when the CAI published a report on its investigations in 1937 it noted that the committee 'felt that it would be unreasonable to expect the average working-class home, or any other home, to be furnished with the uncompromising severity which some modern tastes dictate'. Therefore the committee had included in its selection of approved objects 'articles [which] while of good and pleasant design in themselves, might be expected to meet the popular taste by some added decoration'.⁵⁵ Such concepts may be seen as having informed a set of furniture designed by Gordon Russell Ltd for the CAI investigation, a commission in which Denby was instrumental. The Denbigh range was a set of low-cost furniture for bedrooms and living rooms aimed at the lower-end of the market which would subsequently go on sale at HFL [8.8]. The use of traditional woods and panelled forms combined with simplicity of line met perfectly

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 189. This idea also fits into Matless' (qv) notion of intellectuals seeking to conflate the traditional and the modern at this date.

⁵⁵ CAI (1937), 39.

the desire to be both modern and traditional.⁵⁶ It may also be understood as fitting in with Denby's desire to provide forms which were both recognisable but also sufficiently modernised to simultaneously connote her involvement and to expose their consumers to improvement.

Under such influences Denby entered the second phase of her consultancy. She now assumed the persona of someone who could use her position to bring grassroots opinions and tastes to a broader public through both word and design proposals. In the eighteen months which followed the inauguration of this new self at the RIBA Denby lay relatively low, venturing into the public arena only when the opportunity presented itself to reiterate the ideas she had presented at the end of 1936. Thus in her writings of this period she can be found using a discussion on "Housing and Malnutrition" in the WEA's journal to repeat her demand for gardens or allotments for tenants.⁵⁷ A book review meant she could stress her new association with working-class women. In the course of describing Oud's housing schemes in Rotterdam, she criticised 'the naughtier side of the architectural profession' for designing kitchens too small to be used as dining rooms, adding 'why shouldn't they be used in the way the housewife finds most convenient?'.⁵⁸ An interesting comment from someone who had designed on just such lines herself.

⁵⁶ The commission to Gordon Russell is first noted in CAI minutes for 3.6.36, PRO BT77/a191/35. Denby's involvement seems to have come about as part of her search for products with which to stock HFL, there are several references to her commissioning designers to work for the shop in HFL minutes. Workshop books in the Russell archive have entries for what became the Denbigh range under the name Denby - suggesting her close involvement with the project (correspondence with Russell archivist, Jan. 1998).

⁵⁷ Denby (1937c).

⁵⁸ Denby (1937e).

That none of the 1937 texts offered any substantial advance on her previous year's work is not surprising for she had many other demands on her time that year. Her appointment as Housing Director at Kensal House would have occupied her, as would her work for the CAI and the LCC Housing Committee. She also spent most of that year completing the manuscript of what would be her only major published work, *Europe Rehoused*.⁵⁹

EUROPE REHOUSED

The frequent citation of *Europe Rehoused* (ER) in histories of social housing would seem to indicate that it was one of the most significant things that Denby did. Certainly, alongside Kensal House, it is the work with which she is most associated. Yet, when viewed in the context of her career, ER is less important than its fame implies. So here, rather than attempting an historiographical survey of the place of ER in the study of social housing,⁶⁰ my approach will be to discuss it in terms of the role it played in Denby's career.

ER was significant for Denby in a number of ways. First, the Leverhulme scholarship of which it was the outcome had been one of the factors which led Denby to launch her career as an independent consultant. The research she then carried out for the book allowed her to visit a range of European countries and to amass a body of knowledge about social housing which was, perhaps, unparalleled in Britain at that date and which she could use

⁵⁹ It seems that Denby may have worked on two other projects for books. Carter (1965) refers to a 'much-wanted but never published book' whilst she herself referred to a forthcoming book on housing which again never materialised, though it may be that the surviving text 'My Apprenticeship' formed part of this. See Denby (1963b).

⁶⁰ Though this would be a worthy venture, it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

to further bolster her expertise.⁶¹ By the time of its publication in April 1938 it had assumed a further purpose. Behind the book's ostensible aim of offering a survey of how authorities on the Continent had tackled the issue of slum clearance, lay another. ER was also a medium through which Denby could promote her revised theory and practice for, as one of its reviewers commented 'it has a decidedly propagandist flavour'.⁶²

Denby divided her survey of European housing into two parts. The first considered the origins of the housing problem which she dated to the onset of the Industrial Revolution. She then examined the various national factors which influenced the problem: climate, post-war economy and the nature of land ownership, for example. Finally she discussed the financial aspect: the bodies responsible for house building and the nature of the subsidies available for building. This was very much a schematic survey and the second, and largest, part of the book was devoted to individual studies of European practice. Although she had visited ten countries she decided 'for the sake of simplicity' to discuss 'two winners in the War, two losers and two neutrals': Sweden, Holland, Germany, Vienna, Italy and France.⁶³ This section was completed with a concluding chapter in which she compared continental work with the British system, and the lessons that could be learnt in this country from abroad.

As I have suggested, two readings are possible of the text of ER. On the

⁶¹ Denby visited Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Holland, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Denby (1938b), 13 (my references are from the 2nd edition of 1944).

⁶² Dougill (1938), 217. The appointment in July 1937 of the Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population (Barlow Commission) would, no doubt, also have encouraged Denby to press her case for urban renewal.

⁶³ Denby (1938b), 13.

surface much of what Denby wrote about each country is straightforward. Her use of data, graphs and narrative allows a clear, factually-based understanding of what type of housing was built, where and why. At the same time those aspects of housing practice of which Denby chose to approve, or disapprove, invariably served to support her new approach to housing. Thus Denby held up Red Vienna as the authority which had, in her view, achieved the most successful and complete model of housing in Europe because 'It was...first recognised in Vienna that shelter is not enough, that human beings needed companionship and recreation, need beauty in environment, need the help that can be given to parents still in slums by taking their children into nurseries...'.⁶⁴ Sweden was her next best model. She was impressed by its policy of devolving house-building to tenant-led co-operatives which she felt encouraged social stability. She also approved of the degree of control over development exercised by local planning authorities; something she noted was evident everywhere except Britain.⁶⁵

This approbation served to underline those aspects of Denby's housing theory which emphasised the need to cater for both the physical and social well-being of tenants and her demand that slum clearance schemes should form part of overall planning policies. Her new emphasis on respecting the wishes of the tenants, particularly housewives, is most evident in her criticism throughout the text of the use of the minimum plan. She wrote 'the one serious but (officially) unnoticed fault, and it is one common to most of Europe, is the inconvenience, in fact the intolerable discomfort of

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 253.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 255.

"minimum planning".⁶⁶ She specified Germany and Holland as particularly guilty of this technique and commented how much it was resisted by housewives. In contrast she noted that in Stockholm there was 'a definite reaction against the "minimum-workshop-kitchen"' in favour of a kitchen-dining-room. Although Denby had used just such a minimum-kitchen at both Sassoon and Kensal Houses, her house design for the 1936 scheme shows her beginning to revise this approach by the addition of a dining alcove to the living room [8.3].⁶⁷ By 1939 she had refined this into a design for a large kitchen with eating area [8.12].

In her conclusion to ER Denby offered, in tones which echoed her 1936 speech, a damning indictment of British housing policy:

To sum up, Britain has been jockeyed by the force of public opinion into using her wealth to stimulate the building of a vast quantity of new small dwellings, of which few can compare with the output of any other European nation...The mass of evidence shows that the British housing problem has been cruelly over-simplified. Good housing is not the absence of slums any more that good health is just the absence of disease. Slum clearance in Britain is not merely a question of substituting a clean box for a dirty one. It is not a problem which can be solved by better plumbing⁶⁸

This comment allowed Denby to proceed to a recommendation of the European practices she believed would be worth adopting and adapting into British policy. Again, her suggestions had the result of reinforcing her theory of housing, some also had the potential to create work for her.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 135.

⁶⁷ Evidence shows that some Kensal House inhabitants resisted their minimum-kitchens. The 1942 survey recorded that 21 families ate or sometimes ate in the kitchen 'perched at the ironing board or by the hatch'.

⁶⁸ Denby (1938b), 272-273.

Denby proposed, for example, that 'the quality of Government direction should be improved...First-rate schemes will only be inspired by first-rate people'. Conversant with all the latest developments in housing such people could inspire 'a vigorous campaign among citizens and municipalities, informing, helping, stimulating them to recreate civic life at the same time as they demolish their slums'. They might also form a travelling commission, as had happened in Sweden, to consult local people and convey the problems of particular areas to the Minister of Health.⁶⁹

Equally brazen was her suggestion that central government should revise its approach to densities 'thus family cottages with small gardens could be permitted in central areas...while blocks of flats to any height might be built for the unmarried or childless'.⁷⁰ She further reinforced her self-promotion in her conclusion: 'success will be achieved only when citizens, whatever their incomes, no longer want to escape from their city at every opportunity...'.⁷¹

EUROPE REHOUSED IN CONTEXT

In looking to Europe for lessons on housing Denby was not alone. Throughout the 1930s, in the wake of successive slum-clearance acts, reports, books and articles were published which described housing policy on the Continent. Europe's greater experience in building for the lower-

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 273-275.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 275.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 278.

paid worker was seen as something from which the British might learn.⁷² The nature of this work varied. Some was documentary. A committee formed by the Building Centre, for example, published what was essentially a handbook of European housing which included plans, photographs and statistical data but no interpretative text.⁷³

Other texts had more in common with *Europe Rehoused*'s mixture of reportage and polemic. Reports issued by local authorities which had visited flat developments in Europe were used, as Alison Ravetz has noted, to justify the introduction of flats into British housing programmes. The praise in such reports for the well-equipped and technologically-advanced estates outside Paris and the social amenities of Vienna's *hofs* was a means of implying, perhaps, that British flats would take a similar form.⁷⁴ Commentators also used their travels to justify existing policies. Lewis Silkin, who visited Europe in the autumn of 1935, noted with satisfaction that 'continental policy was tending towards cottage estates on the outskirts of towns'. He did, however, acknowledge that the LCC had much to learn from the Continental habit of defining housing as a social service rather than just the provision of new habitations.⁷⁵

⁷² Interest was also high in the US: Catherine Bauer's 1935 book, *Modern Housing*, being the exemplar. A comparison of Bauer's book with Denby's is beyond the scope of this thesis, as is a comparison of Denby and Bauer. I am reluctant to assume that because they were both women and both wrote on social housing there is necessarily a similarity between the pair. As far as their books are concerned, they are in fact very different in scope and aim. I suggest, though there is little material on Bauer to support a proper assessment, that the two women were correspondingly different.

⁷³ Building Centre Committee (1936). A similarly reasoned account may be found in Yerbury (1938a).

⁷⁴ Ravetz (1974).

⁷⁵ Silkin (1937), 8-11.

The main respect in which Denby's book differed from these texts was that she used her survey to advocate neither cottage estates or modern flats but her vision of mixed development in central urban areas. Curiously, the majority of those who reviewed ER did not mention the central argument of her conclusion. This may suggest that, by 1938, hers was becoming a more popular point of view, at least amongst the cognoscenti who wrote such reviews. Both *The Listener's* and the *Times Literary Supplement's* critics were unstinting in their praise. The former stated that 'every taxpayer should read it', adding that there could be 'no doubt about the authority of the critic - no-one knows more about the tenants' point of view than Elizabeth Denby'.⁷⁶ This view the *Supplement* reiterated: 'this book could hardly fail to be as important as it is given her experience'. It also insisted that all those responsible for housing policy should 'be forced to read such books as these'.⁷⁷ Francis Yerbury, in the *Architectural Review*, approved of her criticism of the British tendency to regard housing as a practice unconnected with the broader issue of planning and made ER his 'book of the month'. He also made some perceptive comments about the type of expert Denby had become: 'she...obviously does not belong to that scientifically-minded school of thought which would *teach* people how to live. Rather, one imagines, she would help them to live in a more comfortable and richer way than they have been able to do so before'.⁷⁸

Not all reviewers were so complimentary. *The Phoenix* noted 'we always expect to be inspired by Miss Denby, even if we do not always agree with

⁷⁶ *The Listener* (1938).

⁷⁷ *TLS* (1938).

⁷⁸ Yerbury (1938b).

her conclusions'.⁷⁹ The most dismissive reviews of ER, however, came from the town-planning press. This is not surprising since Denby made mordant comments about garden cities throughout the book. In its introduction, echoing Sharp, she spoke of the 'romantic escapism' which had led to the movement. In her conclusion she argued that garden cities struck 'at the heart of compact, orderly, intellectually stimulating urban life, sacrificing as they do the positive gains of companionship to the negative ones of segregation, isolation and loneliness'.⁸⁰

Wesley Dougill in the *Town Planning Review* politely suggested that she 'was mistaken to lay the whole blame at the garden city door'.⁸¹ F.J.Osborn, writing in *Town and Country Planning*, in contrast could not contain his contempt. He described ER as 'a blend of chatty travel book and a notebook of interesting housing gadgets...' He alone focused on what he called 'her incredible conclusion', her proposal for high-density cottages. He queried, not unjustifiably, how she had arrived at this model given that she had cited no European equivalents and had championed both the flats in Vienna and the low-density houses built in Sweden. Had Miss Denby, he wondered, gone 'about Europe with her eyes shut'.⁸²

Such reviews, however, were not typical and it may be assumed that Denby was pleased with the generally-positive response to her book. It certainly brought a great deal of publicity for her ideas. This was something she was careful to cultivate whenever possible in the following months, as she had done after her 1936 speech. In June 1938, for example,

⁷⁹ *The Phoenix* (1938).

⁸⁰ Denby (1938b), 28 & 273.

⁸¹ Dougill (1938).

⁸² Osborn (1938), 119.

Denby contributed to the debate sparked when *The Times* published an article 'The Right Use of Land' and an Editorial which both questioned whether garden cities were the correct approach to the re-planning of Britain.⁸³ Under the banner 'The Planning Muddle', pro- and anti-GCTPA theorists fought the issue. Denby wrote twice. First to reiterate her argument on the need for the redistribution of the urban population within cities and second, in response to a letter from Osborn, to criticise his continuing advocacy of low-density development and decentralisation.⁸⁴ A year later Denby was able to reiterate the advocacy of Swedish models of housing first made in ER in a broadcast on the BBC which was subsequently printed in *The Listener*.⁸⁵

PUBLICITY

Such activity shows that one thing that Denby was very good at was (self) publicity. This was a skill which, though her ideas may have been informed by late-nineteenth-century social philosophy, made her thoroughly modern for, as Beatriz Colomina has argued, an engagement with the mass media was a central facet of the modernist project.⁸⁶ Denby's training in propaganda had begun in north Kensington where the Idealist-infused world of the New Philanthropy depended on publicity to awaken the consciences of wealthy citizens. By the 1930s Denby had become adept at all forms of public relations, as evinced in the NHFO exhibitions and her endeavours to publicise first Sassoon House and then Kensal House, though there she was helped by the considerable skills of the GLCC's

⁸³ *The Times* (1938).

⁸⁴ Denby (1938d/e). I have already referred to her revived correspondence with Edwards in the earlier part of 1938 which served a similar purpose.

⁸⁵ Denby (1939a).

⁸⁶ Colomina (1996).

publicity machine.

This work was impressive, but in terms of audiences was insignificant when compared with what was undoubtedly Denby's greatest feat of publicity. In April 1939, a full-scale prototype of the house which had formed the basis of her 1936 mixed-development scheme was displayed at the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition (DMIHE) as the All-Europe House (AEH). For the first time, Denby's work was brought into contact with the mass market, in keeping with her new populist approach.

It is not clear whether Denby played any role in persuading the DMIHE's organisers to give her a platform for her ideas. Her plans for a modern house were certainly in keeping with the ethos promoted at the exhibitions. This emphasised the 'art of home making' and sought to introduce its predominantly female lower-middle-class audience to labour-saving design and appliances.⁸⁷ The organisers had also established a tradition of show houses as the centrepiece of each exhibition as well as giving space to women's organisations which promoted the advance of domestic science, such as the Electrical Association for Women. It may be that the organisers of the 1939 had seen the publicity surrounding first Denby's 1936 speech and then the publication of *Europe Rehoused*, and seen in it a theme which could be exploited for the exhibition. The AEH would be given the by-line: 'the house that is a woman's dream come true'.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ryan (1995), 1.

⁸⁸ DMIHE (1939), 10.

The first hint that the *Daily Mail* might be interested in a display related to working-class housing came in March 1938. The publication of the CAI's report on its investigation into the furnishing and equipment of the working-class flat in the previous May seems to have inspired the DMIHE's organisers to approach the Council with the suggestion that the Council might prepare a display of furniture for working-class consumers at the 1939 exhibition. This was given a positive response by the Council.⁸⁹ Nothing then seems to have happened until August when minutes record that George Grimaldi of the DMIHE had contacted the CAI with a new proposal. He announced that the paper had:

engaged Miss Elizabeth Denby to design, in collaboration with the Exhibition Architect, a working-class three-bedroomed house for the Exhibition, which will embody the best ideas of modern European practice as surveyed in her recently published book on the subject...We shall be happy if the CAI will undertake the furnishing of the house, with the aim of demonstrating how good design and economy may be combined⁹⁰

It was this proposal which was built in 1939. Denby would design the house and a sub-committee of the CAI, which included Denby, was appointed in February 1939 to work on its furnishing.⁹¹

This was a publicity coup for Denby, whoever its instigators were. The commission would enable her to promote not just her book but also her theory of housing and her ideas on furniture for the mass market. More importantly, because these were all projects of which she was the sole author, there would be none of the problems of attribution which had

⁸⁹ Minute sheets for CAI working-class dwellings committee: BT57/22/A408/38, 22 & 23.3.38.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.8.38.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 17.2.39. Other members included Mrs Darcy Braddell, Mrs Tomrley and Christine Veasey, Anon (1939).

marred the publicity for her work with Fry. This time, Denby received all the credit.

THE ALL-EUROPE HOUSE

In the same way that I have suggested *Europe Rehoused* may be read as a survey of Continental social housing and a thinly-disguised polemic for Denby's model of housing, so too can the AEH. Its design was both an amalgamation of features Denby mentioned in her book, as the organisers had stipulated, but also the culmination of the ideas on housing which she had developed since the early 1930s and re-worked during 1936-7. So although the AEH was sited, in prime position, amidst the exhibition's other show-houses, suggesting a kinship with these examples of detached suburbia, Denby's inclusion in her display of plans which showed the house as part of a mixed-development scheme meant that she could emphasise its difference from such villas, and its true function as a mass-produceable prototype for working-class housing. The by-line proposed by the DMIHE was, then, a Trojan horse from which Denby could launch her theory to the widest audience possible.

Denby's plan showed that each AEH, if built as she envisaged, would form part of an echeloned terrace [8.9]. This composition allowed a private terrace to be created at the rear of the house, free from being overlooked by the neighbours. Each house had 'just enough private garden for the family to be able to grow flowers, vegetables...'. This gave onto a communal garden [8.10]. These would be built at densities of between 18-28 to the acre, depending on the size of the garden.⁹²

⁹² DMIHE (1939), 93. The exhibition garden was designed by Christopher Tunnard.

Apart from the staggered plan, these ideas had already been outlined in Denby's 1936 proposals. What she had not discussed then was the style in which the house should be built. As realised, the AEH was constructed in brick, with a flat roof in a simplified, modernised, Georgian idiom [8.11]. This had the benefit of distinguishing her solo work from that she had carried out with Fry. Its appearance can also be understood in terms of the argument about social realism I suggested above. Denby chose a style for her house which workers could recognise; many of them would live in similar brick terraces. At the same time, by abstracting the style she rendered it sufficiently modern to both connote her authorship, and to introduce her intended audience to modern taste; echoing Yerbury's description of Denby as someone who would 'help [the working-class tenants] to live in a more comfortable and richer way than they have been able to do so before'.

This acknowledgement and mediation of working-class taste may also be traced in the interior planning of the AEH [8.12]. Though not dissimilar to the plans she had designed in her flats, there were significant alterations which reflect her absorption of housewives' views. So whilst the house had a very large living room (12 by 18 feet), all eating was removed from it into a new feature, the kitchen-dining room. Like her earlier work the kitchen was planned on labour-saving lines and incorporated the latest technology. The copper was replaced by a washing machine, there was also a refrigerator and each sink was fitted with the Garchy waste-disposal system she had first seen and admired in Paris in 1934. The furnishing of the house by the CAI sub-committee reflected the undogmatic tendency I have already noted in the 1937 Report [8.13]. The furniture is modern, but

not too modern and featured a reasonable amount of ornament and pattern. In such a house, the catalogue declared, 'the housewife...would find herself fresher, spending less money, with more leisure than she had ever had in the past, while her home would form part of a compact and pleasant street in the town'.⁹³

This comment refers to Denby's plans for a mixed-development scheme exhibited alongside the house [8.14]. Though this does not seem to have been part of the original commission from the exhibition's organisers, the announcement by the LCC in November 1938 that it intended to develop a 64 acre site at Seven Sisters Road, Stoke Newington, into an estate of 1660 dwellings, seems to have led Denby to decide that it would be a good idea to produce an alternative set of plans for the same site.⁹⁴ Her aim was to demonstrate that by using mixed-development concepts a greater number of people could be housed on the site and in houses rather than flats.

Denby's plan, which was drawn up with the help of the architect Godfrey Samuel, was to arrange the accommodation either side of Seven Sisters Road which, she said, would become a grand boulevard with street markets 'tidily arranged', and a small terrace of shops. To the north of the site would be a series of eleven-storey slab blocks entered by internal staircases, each having large south-facing balconies. To the south were twelve sets of cottages, each arranged around a block of land, backing onto a communal garden. Two four-storey blocks of maisonettes were also

⁹³ DMIHE (1939), 94.

⁹⁴ Cutting from *Daily Star*, 5.11.38 in SaG/73/4, though Denby's seat on the LCC Housing Committee meant she may have had prior knowledge of the scheme. The site was eventually developed into the Woodberry Down estate, the first phases of which were opened in 1948. See Woodberry Down Memories Group (1989).

included. Provision was made for a community centre, playgrounds and a school.⁹⁵ Denby claimed that if the cottages were built at twenty to the acre, she could provide 1757 dwellings as opposed to the 1660 provided by the LCC.⁹⁶

RESPONSES TO THE AEH

The vast majority of those who saw Denby's display were impressed. There was one group, however, who were less than pleased by it: the LCC's Housing Committee. Given that she was a member of this body, Denby's decision to promote a scheme in opposition to her colleagues in such a public arena was somewhat foolhardy, especially since she had already upset Silkin with her 1936 speech. The Committee was not impressed. In a letter Denby wrote to Godfrey Samuel she describes how Ruth Dalton had called to warn 'that the LCC Architects are boiling with rage and have Silkin and other influential members of the Council warmly behind them. My action as a member of committee is apparently indefensible'.⁹⁷ It seems unlikely that someone as canny as Denby could be quite so disingenuous. The whole incident demonstrates the danger of Denby's headstrong personality and her inability to submit to a party line. It made her some powerful enemies.

This was an exception. Commentators in the daily, weekly and architectural press were unanimous in their praise for the AEH. The daily papers were impressed by the down-to-earth nature of the house and its labour-saving design, one described it as 'Humanity House'.⁹⁸ The *New*

⁹⁵ Typescript of plan description, SaG/73/4.

⁹⁶ Denby's calculations taken from *ibid*, densities from Anon (1939).

⁹⁷ Letter of 11.5.39, SaG/73/4.

⁹⁸ Adams (1939).

Statesman's critic summarised the hope of many reporters when he said 'I only hope that Miss Denby's ideas will break down a few of the rigid traditions which make so many Housing Schemes both dull and expensive'.⁹⁹

The architectural press also welcomed Denby's proposals: 'the one really worthwhile feature',¹⁰⁰ 'the best exhibit...designed by Miss Elizabeth Denby...a really beautiful and well-equipped job'.¹⁰¹ *The Architect and Building News* was particularly impressed by her plans for Stoke Newington, noting its contrast with the LCC's 'time-honoured but somewhat unimaginative flat-building policy'. It continued 'Miss Denby's breakaway is important because it comes from somebody who has studied housing from the workers' standpoint and has learnt much from collaboration with architects'.

This comment is interesting for it brings me back to a consideration of the question of authorship which so dogged Denby's career. I have suggested that as far as Denby was concerned she was the author of all the projects she designed whether in collaboration or not. Certainly references made by her to the AEH support this contention. In correspondence which relates to a possible private commission for a detached version of the AEH she wrote '*I originally designed it as part of a terrace...*' (my italics). Pictures of her in the press from this period show her leaning against a drawing board, pen in hand, suggesting that in her mind she was an architect [frontispiece C]. Similarly, although she had help from Samuel in

⁹⁹ Critic (1939).

¹⁰⁰ ABN (1939).

¹⁰¹ Astragal (1939).

preparing the mixed-development plans, the correspondence between her and his practice shows that they enacted the role I have suggested for Fry, of realising her ideas, not originating them. Documents show them changing plans in receipt of new material from Denby.¹⁰² She would later thank them 'for making my ideas architecturally good and right...'¹⁰³ The *ABN* was the only paper which mentioned Samuel as the plan's designer; everyone else accepted that the house and the plans were Denby's work.

When the DMIHE closed in May 1939 all the signs were that Denby's career was going from strength to strength. She had received full credit and considerable approbation for her work. Even more positively she had secured four potential commissions for single versions of the AEH.¹⁰⁴ She had also been recruited by Paddington Borough Council to advise them on their slum-clearance programme.¹⁰⁵ The new Denby had, it seemed, been vindicated.

¹⁰² SaG/73/4, correspondence in March 1938.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, letter, 19.4.39.

¹⁰⁴ SaG/68/3. Clearly, the AEH was also a Trojan horse for a business venture by Denby. She formed a partnership with Godfrey Samuel's practice, Samuel and Harding, whereby she acted as agent and adviser to people who wished to have built a version of the AEH, and they carried out the design work. One version was actually built, at Jordans in Buckinghamshire. See Gould (1977).

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of Paddington Borough Council, Special Housing Committee, 1.3.39. Denby was recruited, at a fee of 500 guineas, to advise on the redevelopment of the Clarendon Street slum clearance area.

Additions and Corrections:

- Page 25 *Note:* The Penguin Pool reveals Lubetkin's debt to Russian Constructivism. Lubetkin studied with Gabo in Moscow, 1920. (cf. *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936. pp. 138, 200.) In a letter from Moscow, May 23, 1936, Jay Leyda points out the close resemblance of the Penguin Pool to a stage setting by Meyerhold and Lissitzky, 1929.
- Page 96 *No. 19 should read:* Sassoon House, Peckham, London, 1934 (in collaboration with Elizabeth Denby, Consultant on Low Rental Housing Schemes).
- Page 97 *No. 23 should read:* Kensal House, Ladbroke Grove, North Kensington, London, 1936-37. Architects: Robert Atkinson, E. Maxwell Fry (Executant), C. E. James, Grey Wornum; with Elizabeth Denby, Housing Consultant.
- No. 24 should read:* Flats for the Capitol Housing Association, Limited, Ladbroke Grove Estate, North Kensington, London, 1936-37. Architects: Robert Atkinson, E. Maxwell Fry (Executant), C. E. James, Grey Wornum; with Elizabeth Denby, Housing Consultant.
- No. 26* is the only work listed which was done in partnership with Walter Gropius.

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TYPE. Three- and four-room flats for workers.

ACCESS. Gallery. One enclosed staircase.

NO. OF FLATS. Three three-room and one four-room per floor; five floors; Total: 20 flats.

AREA. Building 2,890 sq. ft. 25% of site built on. 80 flats per acre.

SERVICES. Nine pram sheds and clothes drying rails in paved yard. Refuse chute.

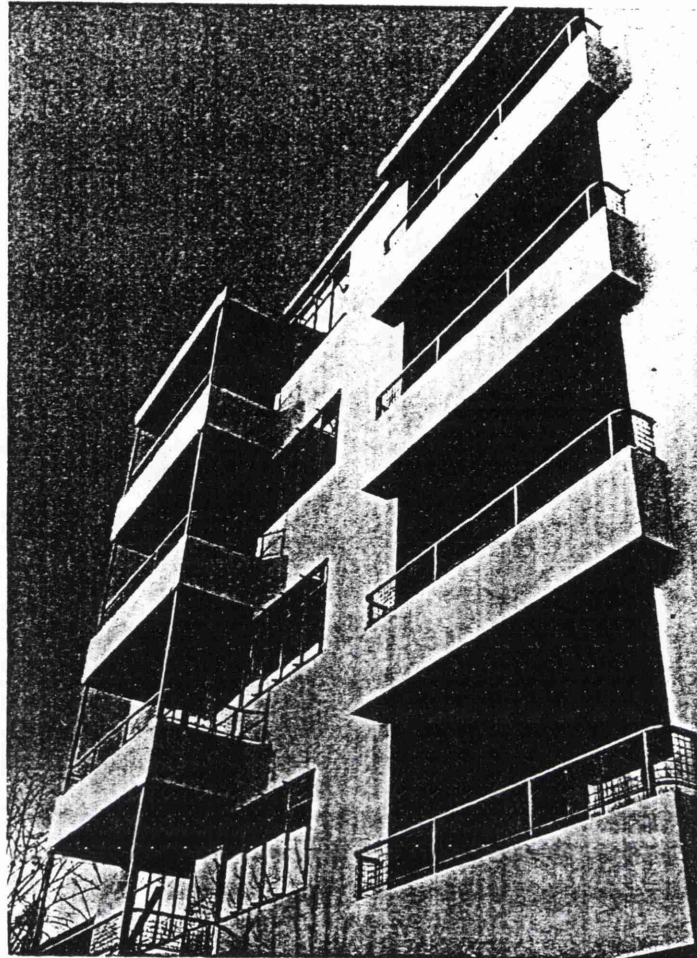
CONSTRUCTION. Reinforced concrete frame. External walls 4 in. R.C. panels lined on the inside with 1 in. cork and painted outside. Hollow tile R.C. floors lined on the underside with insulating board. R.C. cantilevered balconies. Breeze and hollow brick partitions. Floors screeded and covered with heavy linoleum. Walls and ceilings plastered and distempered.

HEATING. Hot water to kitchen sink and bath is by a small gas water heater. A gas cooker and copper are provided in the kitchen, and heating to the living room is by a slow-burning coke stove with oven above.

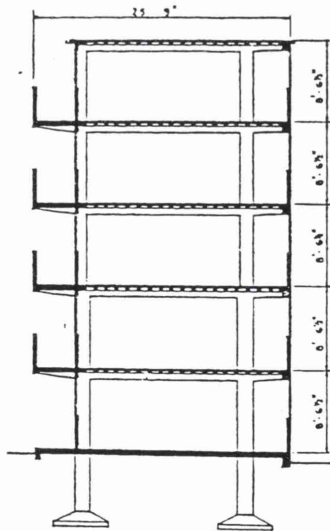
FINANCE. Managed by Pioneer Housing Trust Ltd. Cost of building £7,255 or £362 per average flat. Price per cu. ft. 1/0½.

CORRECTION

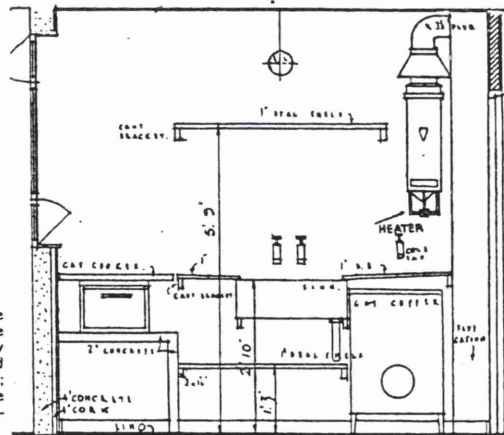
Elizabeth Denby collaborated with E. Maxwell Fry in the design and construction of Sassoon House and her name should therefore have appeared together with that of E. Maxwell Fry at the head of this page.

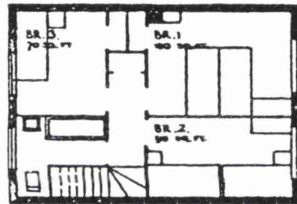
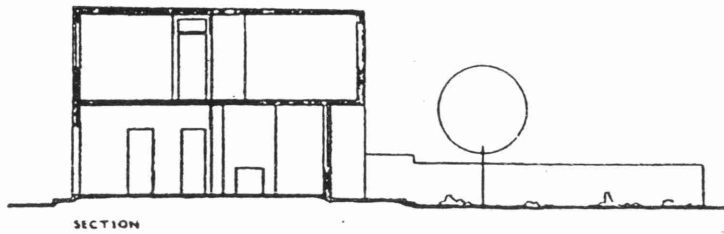


Each flat has a balcony 11 ft. x 4 ft. 6 in. approx.; large enough for children to play on or for sleeping out in summer. Each balcony is bounded on the outside by an 18 in. deep flower box surmounted by a tube and wire railing acting as protection and as a climbing fence for flowers.



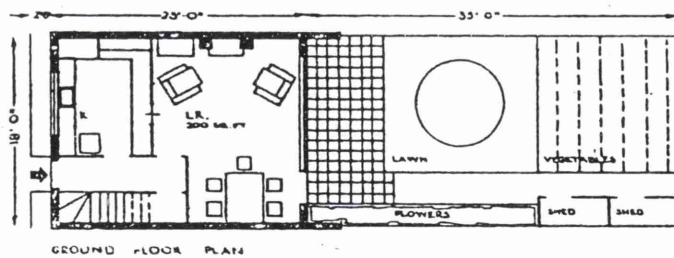
The diagram on the left is the cross section showing the simple R.C. frame with hollow tile floors and cantilevered access galleries and balconies; that on the right shows the "working wall" of the standardised kitchen.

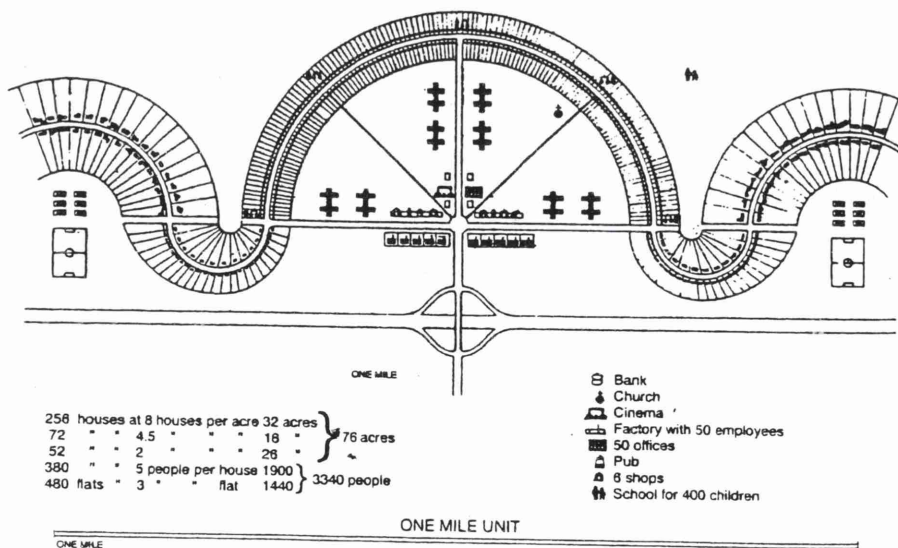
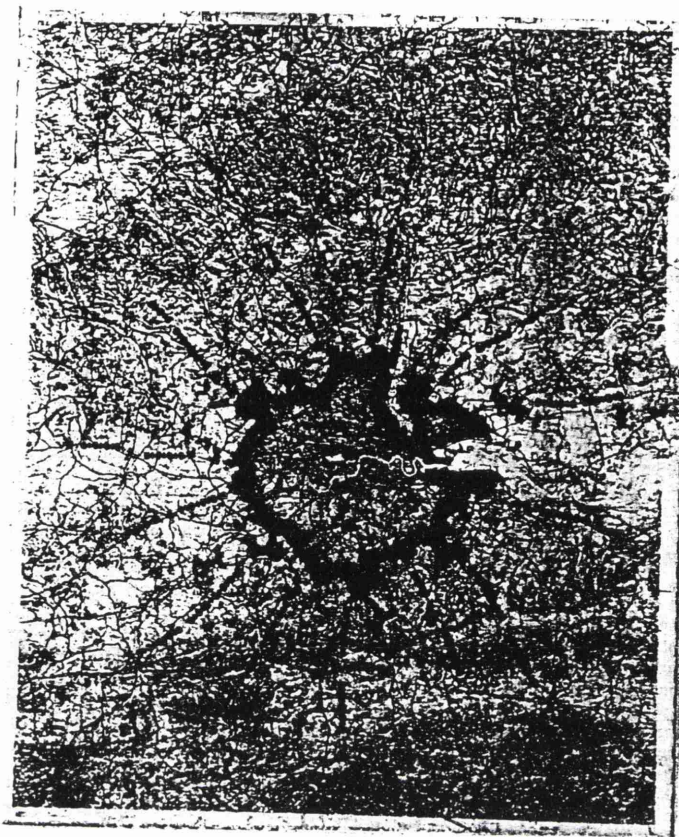




THIS TERRACE IS DESIGNED TO RUN
NORTH - SOUTH

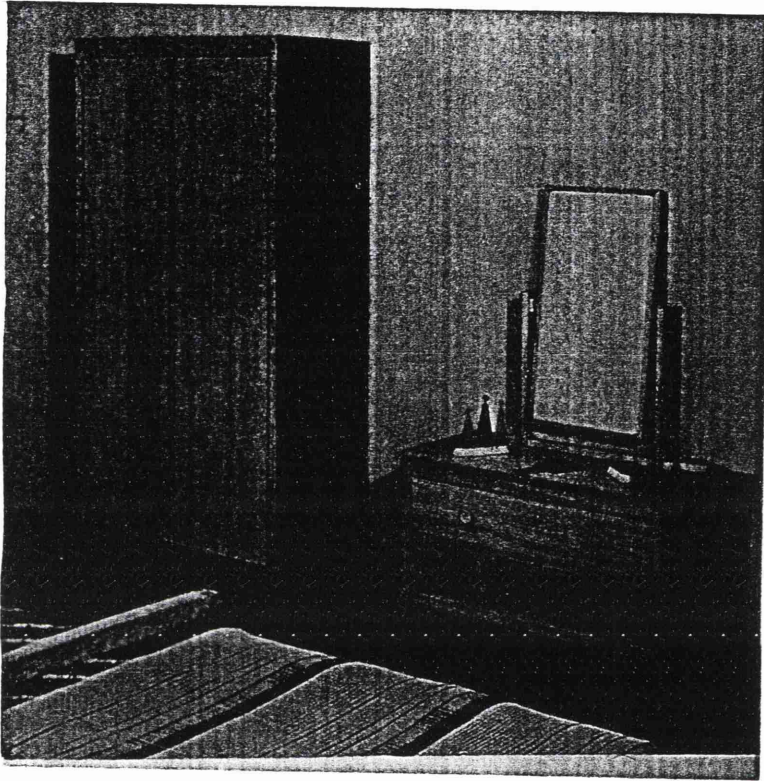
SCALE OF FEET:
0 10 20 30



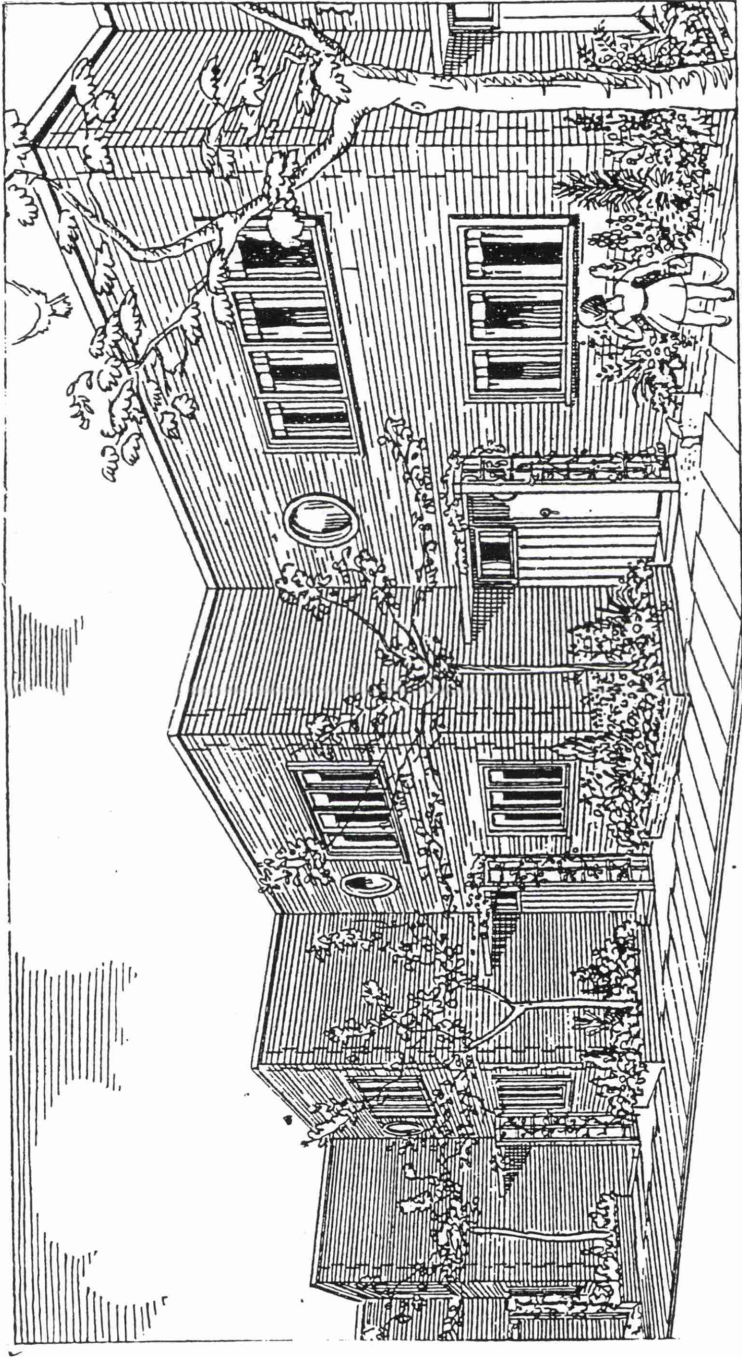


8.6: The Tatton Browns' Plan for a Linear City, 1937

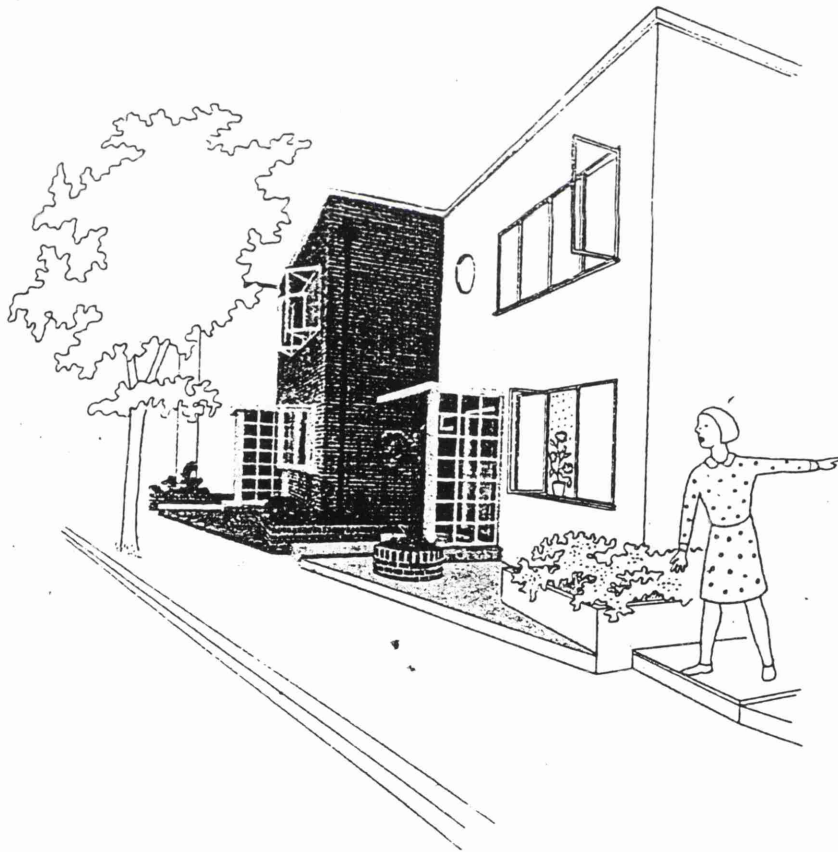
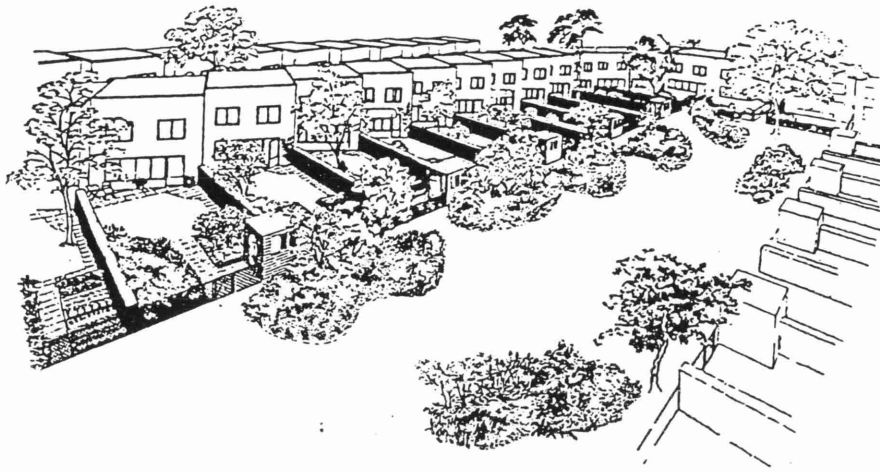
8.7: The Tatton Browns' Linear City: Neighbourhood Unit, 1937



8.8: Bedroom Furniture from Denbigh Range, Gordon Russell Ltd, 1937

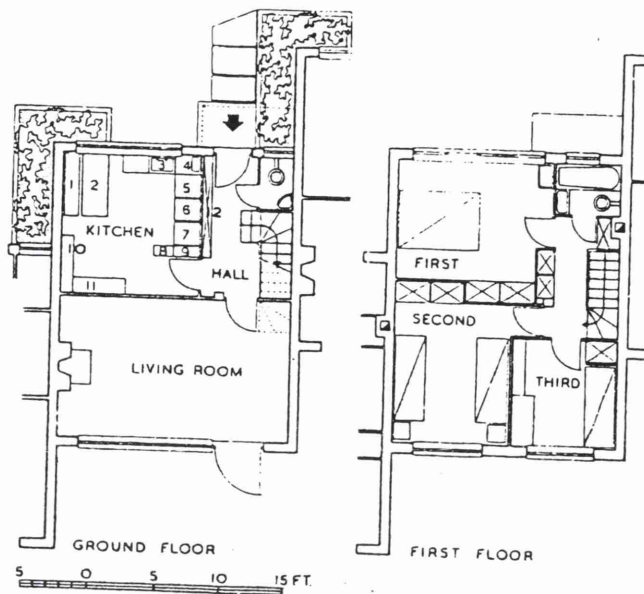


8.9: The All-Europe House: Street Front



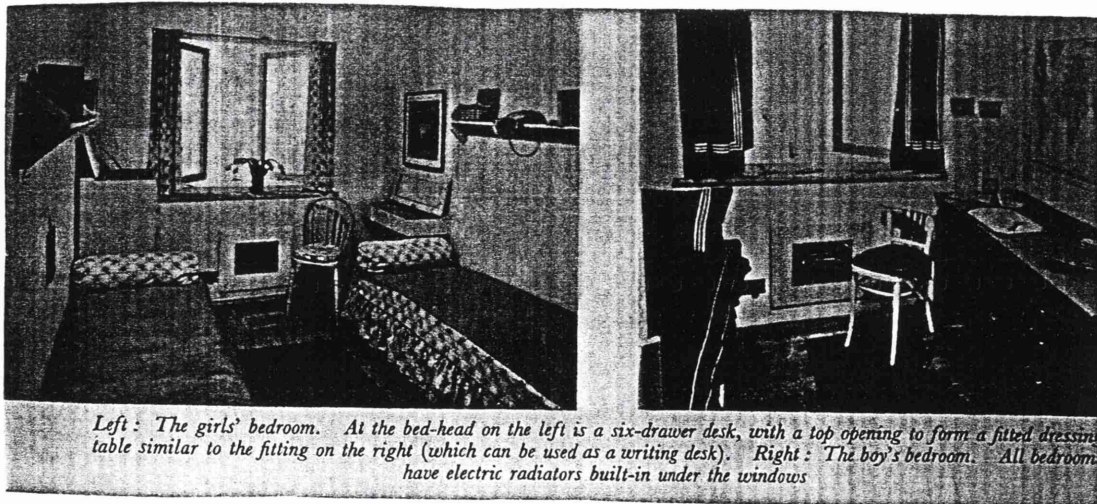
8.10: The All-Europe House: Rear Gardens and Communal Gardens

8.11: The All-Europe House: Style



Key to the Kitchen and Hall.

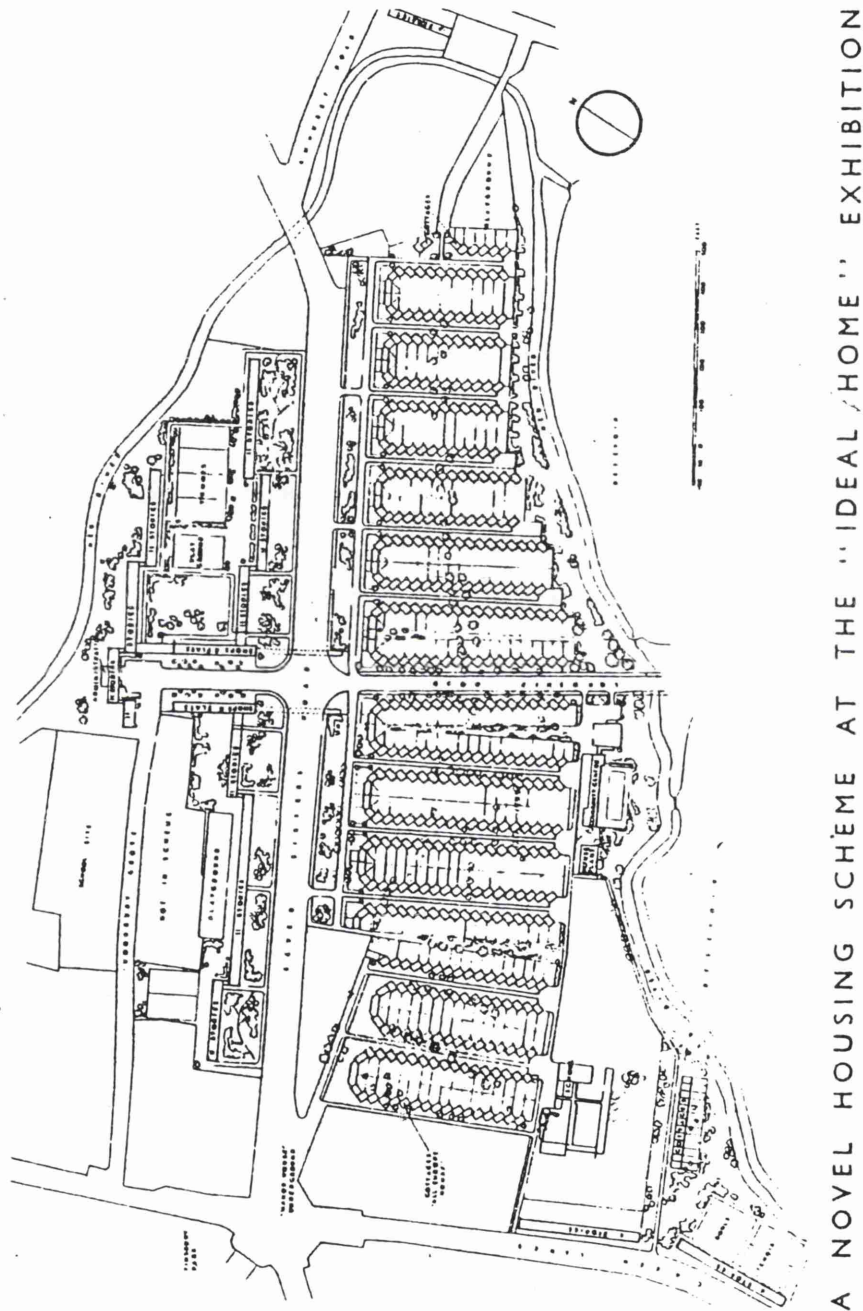
- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. Built-in seat | 7. Refrigerator |
| 2. Table | 8. Drying cabinet |
| 3. Garbage sink | 9. Brooms |
| 4. Water heater | 10. China |
| 5. Washer | 11. Dry goods |
| 6. Cooker | 12. Hats, coats, meters, and access to coke store |



Left: The girls' bedroom. At the bed-head on the left is a six-drawer desk, with a top opening to form a fitted dressing table similar to the fitting on the right (which can be used as a writing desk). Right: The boy's bedroom. All bedrooms have electric radiators built-in under the windows

8.12: The All-Europe House: Plan

8.13 The All-Europe House: Bedroom Interiors



A NOVEL HOUSING SCHEME AT THE "IDEAL HOME" EXHIBITION

8.14: Denby's Proposal for a Mixed-Development Scheme

CHAPTER NINE

POSTSCRIPT

The outbreak of war in September 1939 brought to an end the six years of activity which Denby had pursued since she launched her career as a housing consultant in October 1933. Although she would continue to write, advise and design during wartime and after, her subsequent career cannot be said to have matched the scope or success of her inter-war work. It is for this reason that this thesis has focused on tracing Denby's evolution into a housing consultant from 1894 to 1939 and the central years of her practice between 1933 and 1939. The thesis would, however, be incomplete without some consideration of her work and life between 1939 and her death in 1965 and it is the purpose of this postscript to offer a brief account of this activity.

DENBY IN WARTIME

After the success of the Ideal Home Exhibition all the indications were that Denby's career would continue to expand and become more successful. It was not to be. The outbreak of war saw plans for all but one version of the All-Europe House shelved and the slum clearance scheme on which she was acting as adviser to Paddington Borough Council was also abandoned.¹ This period also saw her afflicted with the first of a bout of

¹ The minutes of Paddington Borough Council make no reference to Denby or the Clarendon St. scheme after 1939. The site was eventually developed by the LCC into the Warwick Estate which overlooks the Westway, from the late 1950s onwards. In this process Denby played no part.

serious illnesses which would affect her career henceforth.² Despite these setbacks, Denby seems to have been able to recover herself so that by the early 1940s she had resumed her work as a consultant. What she seems to have done, once she was in sufficiently good health was, as she had done in the first years of her consultancy, to go to the work which was available and adapt her skills to this type of activity. Thus, in wartime, Denby worked primarily as a researcher for the investigative bodies which were founded following the outbreak of war and, later, as government policy moved towards preparations for post-war reconstruction.

Her first such job was as a member of the Hygiene Committee of the Women's Group on Public Welfare, an offshoot of the National Council of Social Service. This was established in November 1939 to investigate and collate evidence about the health and morals of the mothers and children who had been evacuated in the first month of war. Denby participated in its research work and also contributed an appendix to the Committee's report, *Our Towns a Close Up*, which was published in early 1943.³ She also worked as a researcher for the Nuffield College Reconstruction Committee and served as a member of the RIBA's Housing Group. Its report, *Housing*, was published in 1944.⁴

An extension of this work was Denby's service as a witness to some of the investigative committees set up by the Coalition Government as part of its plans for reconstruction. In early 1942 she gave evidence to the Scott

² Letter from Denby to Lady Pepler, Oct. 1965, in possession of author. One highlight would have been the award, in 1942, of Honorary Associateship of the RIBA - she was nominated by Patrick Abercrombie. See RIBA Council Minutes, 16.12.41 and 13.2.42 and *AJ* (1942).

³ See Barclay (1976), Welshman (1999), and Women's Group on Public Welfare (1943).

⁴ Addison (1995) covers the wartime reconstruction debates in detail, see 181 for his discussion of the Nuffield Survey. See RIBA Housing Group (1944) for its conclusions.

Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas and at an unknown date was called as a witness to the Dudley Committee, a sub-committee of the Central Housing Advisory Committee. Its brief was to examine the form of the dwellings to be built after the war ended. She was also recruited onto the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee in July 1942 (UFAC).⁵

1942 was a busy year for Denby. As well as serving on and speaking to government committees she also curated an exhibition called 'Homes to Live In' for the British Institute of Adult Education which was held at St.Martin's School of Art. Its aim was 'to stimulate ordinary people into considering the many aspects involved in the building of their future homes'; its contents included displays on dwelling types - houses and flats and Denby's mixed-developments plans from 1939.⁶ Such work was aimed, it seems reasonable to assert, at influencing the future direction of government policy, as so much of her work had been concerned to do in the inter-war years. As then, she also sought to pursue this aim through writing and lecturing. Her main themes at this date were to stress the need to design from the woman's point of view,⁷ and to promote her ideas on high-density urban planning.⁸

⁵ See PRO HLG/80/124 for Denby's evidence to Scott Committee. The papers of the Dudley Committee at PRO HLG/37/62-63 have been viciously weeded, however HLG/37/63, paper P.D.1, undated, has Denby on a list with the heading 'the expression of opinion on the part of these individuals who have interested themselves in housing will be valuable'. It also lists Irene Barclay, Olive Matthews, Miss Jeffery and T.Alwyn Lloyd. Alas, the documentation of Denby's evidence has not survived, though it is certain that she gave evidence as she is listed as a witness in the Committee's report, see GB Ministry of Health (1944). UFAC's papers are at PRO BT 64.

⁶ Mass Observation Archive, M-OA TC: Housing 8/J, copy of press release for the exhibition, and M-OA TC: Housing 8/G 'Cripps at Housing Exhibition'. Denby's collaborator in the exhibition, Noel Carrington, also discusses it briefly in Carrington (1976).

⁷ See Denby (1941a/b/1942d).

⁸ See Denby (1940b/1942a/1943c/1944g).

A final activity, and one which spanned the end of war and beginning of peace, was her appointment as Director of Housing to Tarran Industries Ltd.⁹ Tarran was one of the main suppliers of prefabricated dwellings under the government's temporary housing programme which was begun in October 1944 and Denby seems to have been employed, though very little documentary evidence survives to establish precisely what she did, either as a designer or as an adviser on design.¹⁰ There are some drawings for kitchens, labelled Tarran, amongst Denby's papers but since they do not correspond to what Tarran actually built it is unclear what influence she may have had.¹¹ The ending of the temporary housing programme in 1947, the same year that Tarran was wound up, meant that it was not a major source of work for her, though since it contained some element of design work this may have been something she regretted.

DENBY AFTER 1945

As had been the case in early wartime, Denby's post-war career was hampered by illness. This time it was so severe that she nearly died.¹² So in contrast to her omnipresence in the 1930s, for the rest of the 1940s she remained almost completely subdued. The second half of the decade saw no writing or lecturing. Her only activity came in 1946 when she designed a model interior for the Britain Can Make It exhibition [9.1].¹³ The fifties followed a similar pattern; she seems to have withdrawn almost entirely from public discussion. There were only two occasions on which she

⁹ This was recorded in the Personalia column of the 1945 edition of the *Bradford Girls Grammar School Chronicle*.

¹⁰ See Vale (1995) and Bowley (1966) on Tarran's work.

¹¹ DP 11 66 99, drawings for Tarran Houses.

¹² Letter from Denby to Lady Pepler, Oct. 1965, in possession of author.

¹³ See Maguire and Woodham (1997) for a recent account of the exhibition.

emerged as anything like the Denby of the thirties. At both, she sought to promote once again her argument from 1936 and 1939.

In June 1955, Denby attended a speech made by Professor Charles Madge to the RIBA on 'Sociology and Architecture'. Her comments in the ensuing discussion were recorded and show her arguing against the post-war policy of comprehensive redevelopment and dispersal and stressing the social good to be gained in rehousing people in the areas in which they originally lived. Interestingly, she prefaced these comments with the declaration, 'speaking as a sociologist'. This suggests a final phase of reinvention by Denby. As a sociologist she could fit in with the professionalised, technocratic society of the post-war Welfare State.¹⁴

Denby was able to pick up the anti-dispersal theme the following year in her contribution to a special issue of the *Architectural Review*, edited by Ian Nairn, called *Counter Attack against Subtopia*. This formed part of the journal's efforts to develop a modern school of planning which did not, as it believed post-war planners had done, create a subtopia in which the distinctions between town and country were blurred and differences were smoothed away.¹⁵ Alongside articles which laid out the principles for a new approach to planning and various case studies of good and bad landscaping, Denby wrote on "Oversprawl". She argued that her high-density and centralist approach to planning would prevent the blurring between town and country from taking place: 'True urban development makes unnecessary both sprawl and overspill (which is only sprawl-gone-

¹⁴ See Madge (1955), 380-382.

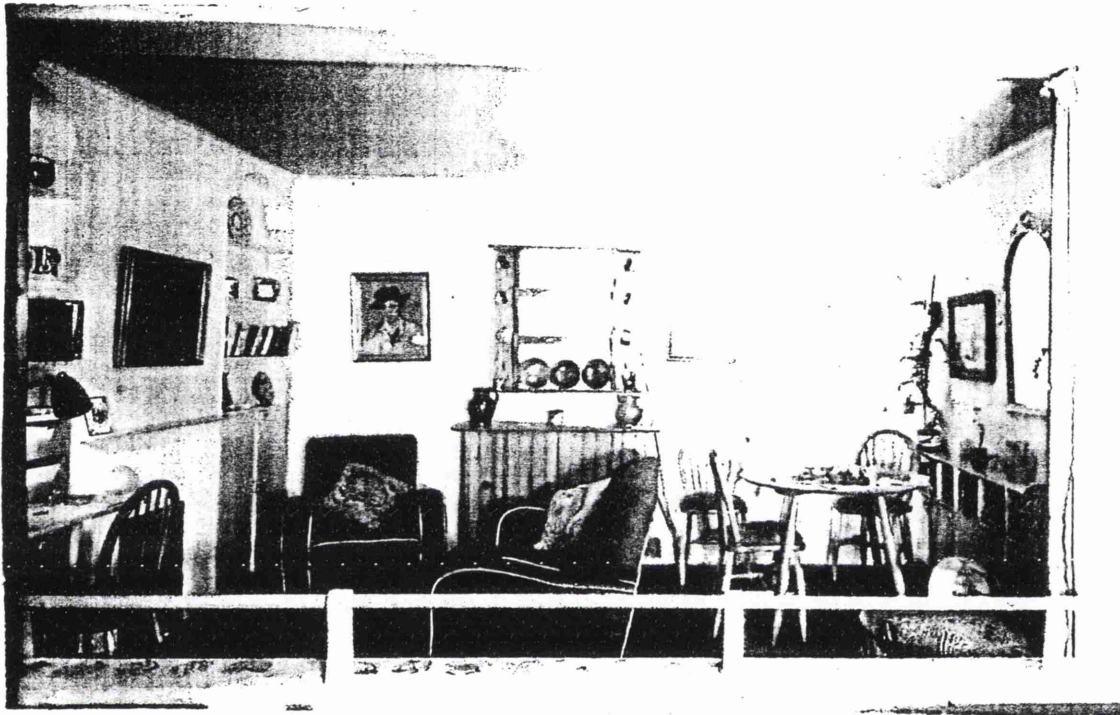
¹⁵ Nairn (1956), 355.

somewhere-else).¹⁶

This was Denby's last significant public act. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a few articles and reviews but by this date she had contracted the cancer which would kill her.¹⁷ After years of urban living she moved from her home in London (which had been Wilmington Square, Clerkenwell since the mid-1950s) to Hythe in Kent. There she died, on 4th November 1965, at the age of 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 430. She also followed up this argument in response to articles published by critics of the *Counter Attack* issue - Denby (1957a/b/c). Denby's mini-biography in the section on contributors to the issue also reveals her re-presentation of herself as a sociologist. It mentions her training at the LSE and her wartime advisory work at the expense of any mention of her inter-war work.

¹⁷ See Denby (1959/1962a/b and 1963a/b).



9.1: Britain Can Make It Exhibition, 1946: Denby's Room Set for a Family
on a New Estate

PART THREE

ASSESSING DENBY



D: Elizabeth Denby, 1942

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

In the final chapter of this thesis I turn to an assessment of the extent and nature of Denby's achievements and influence in the inter-war decades. Having done this, I then want to move to a more general, and speculative, consideration of where Denby's long-term influence might lie.

DENBY IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

It is my hope that the discussion in Parts One and Two of this thesis has shown that Elizabeth Denby occupied a significant space within debates about, and practices of, architecture, design and social reform in the inter-war period. It was my implication in this discussion, and something that I want to reiterate here, that she was also a figure of some influence.

In the 1920s, this was an influence which Denby exerted in the milieu in which she had trained and then worked: the voluntary (housing) sector. During her career at the KHA/T, her work as its main propagandist enabled it to raise the funds necessary to build model housing for Kensington's poor and draw attention to the slum problem as a whole. From this base, she was also able to play an active part in moves across the voluntary housing sector towards greater unity of action against the slum problem. This culminated in her work as organiser of the first two NHFO exhibitions and the substantial role she played in the formation of what became the main arena for (progressive) housing debate in the 1930s.

The formation of the Housing Centre was, as I discussed, evidence of the new role the voluntary housing sector would take from the 1930s onwards. Its marginalisation from the provision of social housing by the series of slum clearance acts passed by central government between 1930 and 1935 led it to reinvent itself as an advisory and think-tank organisation. This was a process mirrored (though there were other more personal reasons for it too) in Denby's reinvention of herself from the KHA/T's Organising Secretary to independent housing consultant in 1933. As a consultant working for, though not as a part of, institutions, Denby was able to promote and develop the theory of housing which she had absorbed from her study at the LSE and her 'apprenticeship' in north Kensington. This was a theory which encompassed the combination of material and social reform; a concern to enable the development of a sense of citizenship in those at whom her work was directed; and a desire to bring beauty to everyday life. The range and scope of activities to which she applied this theory in this decade - only some aspects of which I have discussed here - surely suggest that it was accepted by many as a solution to the social problems of the day. Her recruitment by organisations which ranged from the private - the Gas, Light and Coke Company, MARS Group or PEP - to the public - the Council for Art and Industry (twice in three years) and the LCC - reinforces this observation.¹

My discussion in Part Two also showed how Denby played a major role in the development of a practice which united the theory of social welfare of the voluntary housing sector with the search for a modern architecture in order to produce a social and architectural solution to the problem of

¹ As does the award of Honorary Associate of the RIBA in July 1942.

rehousing former slumdweller. This began with R.E.Sassoon House and reached its finest expression in the scheme outlined in Denby's 1936 RIBA speech and re-presented as the All-Europe House at the Ideal Home Exhibition of spring 1939. I also used this discussion to award Denby the primary authorship of the two housing schemes she was able to see built in this decade: Sassoon House and Kensal House. Fry, I suggest, was very fortunate to have met Denby.

In the discussion so far, my assessment of Denby has focused on a consideration of her in terms of her own biography but the detailed study which I have written of her was always intended to enable me to make some general observations about what her work might tell us about the factors, institutions and individuals which influenced the formation of housing and social policy in the inter-war period. In so doing, two main themes have emerged in my study.

First my thesis has, I hope, provided a solid body of evidence to show that the existence of a figure like Denby, and contemporaries like Irene Barclay, Rachel Alexander, and her co-workers in the NHFO exhibitions, demonstrates the continuation into the inter-war period of the tradition of women having access to and influence over the creation of the built environment which had begun with Octavia Hill. Indeed, the range of interests exhibited by Denby and her contemporaries - in housing, education, health, design, amongst many other things - suggests that this influence was not confined to the built environment.

Women formed, then, a considerable strand within what I called the alternative mainstream of the 1920s and 1930s and often originated the theories which it promoted. In making this point I argued against Jane Lewis' suggestion that women's influence over the making of social theory did not survive to a significant degree into the post-1918 era. What I hope I have achieved in this thesis is to have revised her argument and carried out the research to suggest that the date of the decline of women's influence can be pushed into the years after 1945, at least in the case of housing.

My discussion of the presence of the MARS Group and ATO at the later NHFO exhibitions did, however, give some clues about the changing nature of women's work in the built environment in the 1930s. It is possible to see the way that first MARS and then ATO used the invitation from what was an entirely female exhibition committee to gain access to spheres of influence through which they could promote themselves and their modernist doctrine. Rather than creating a space for themselves they colonised one which another group, all-female, had already created; a process which can be seen as prefiguring the eclipse of women's influence in the post-war era. In addition, the problems Denby faced in the correct attribution of the buildings she co-designed with Fry can be partly explained by the difficulties male architectural critics had with the notion of female creativity.

My second general conclusion is drawn from the observation that the fact that Denby worked for the voluntary housing sector, both directly in the twenties and indirectly in the thirties, is testament to the continued

influence of this sector as one of the most important - perhaps the most - arena for the development of ideas and practices of progressive social reform in twentieth-century Britain. Again it is my hope that my account of the work of the KHA/T and the evolution of the Housing Centre from the NHFO group will contribute to what is today emerging as a major area of revisionist study: the work of the voluntary sector as a whole and the influence of its Idealist philosophies on British social policy throughout this century.

The scope of my study has allowed me to assert clear links between Denby's ideas and their absorption into policy by various inter-war institutions. It is, then, fair to say that in the 1920s and 1930s Denby was a figure of standing and influence but is it possible to go any further than this and assert that Denby had an influence beyond this immediate milieu and era?

DENBY IN WARTIME AND THE POST-WAR ERA

An attempt to make a similar set of links between Denby's ideas and the development of social policy after the Second World War would, I think, require another thesis. Nevertheless, I would like here to make some general, and necessarily speculative, comments on how Denby might be judged in the long term and indicate some future areas for research which these observations open up.

It is clear from my discussion, both here and in the main body of the thesis, that Denby should be understood as having operated within the alternative mainstream of the inter-war decades. It should also be clear,

and it has been an underlying assumption throughout this thesis, that there are connections to be made between this grouping's ideas and what became the post-war settlement. This is hardly a new observation, Tomlinson has noted how, '...in the 1940s it was to a considerable extent those who were "out" in the 1930s who came to wield influence or to be in political power'.²

If this is the case, and I think it is, then Denby must have had some influence over post-war social policy by virtue of her 'outside' position in the 1930s. Indeed, Denby's wartime activities show how, like many of her 'alternative' contemporaries, she was a conduit through which pre-war ideas entered the post-war era. This she was able to achieve through her position as a witness to or member of the numerous investigations and government committees - Dudley, Scott, UFAC and so on - whose work was absorbed into the legislative framework of the Welfare State.

It is possible to link both Denby's pre-war and wartime activity with aspects of the post-war settlement. The Utility scheme was a primary factor in the establishment of the Council of Industrial Design thus realising her pre-war concern to promote good design for the mass market. In the field of housing her promotion of working kitchens in the AEH, her advocacy of balconies for flats and of mixed development - a very alternative position in the thirties - were endorsed by countless wartime reports and became central elements of post-war housing policy.³ But this discussion serves merely to prove a correlation not a direct link; priority in the

² Tomlinson (1992), 155.

³ See Association for Planning and Regional Reconstruction (1946) for a survey of wartime reports on housing.

ownership of ideas does not in itself prove long-term influence. Indeed, I could equally show that for every idea which was adopted after the war another was not. Denby's interest in preventative medicine or urban replanning at high densities rather than decentralisation, for example, were both ignored.

I am, then, led to the conclusion that Denby's longer-term influence lay in her membership of the pre-war alternative mainstream. Her ideas survived into the post-war era only where they coincided with those of others within this group and the legislators outside it. This cherry picking of Denby's - or rather the sector she represents - ideas offers an interesting starting point for further study. What were the ideological circumstances in the post-war era which led to the adoption of some pre-war ideas but the rejection of others?

A related area of further research would be to trace what happened after the war to the women who had originated many of these ideas. Denby's career after 1945, when she all but disappeared from the architectural scene, would seem to bear out Lewis' noting of women's oblivion once the Welfare State emerged. Was it the case, as Bobby Carter noted in his obituary of Denby, that '...the peculiar scene in which her wit and wisdom and combativeness could flourish seemed to have passed'.⁴ Or would more research show that women continued to create opportunities for themselves from the circumstances which faced them, just as Denby had done before the war?

⁴ Carter (1965).

IN CONCLUSION

Denby's post-war silence and Carter's words offer a rather sad epitaph to the years of vibrant, innovative activity which Denby pursued in the inter-war period. She herself felt that she had ultimately failed in her mission to serve the poor.⁵ It may be the biographer's conceit to refuse to allow her subject to fail but it seems to me, writing at the end of the twentieth century, that Denby did not fail. Her success lies in the fact that her work and life tells us not just about the past but also contains some valuable lessons for the present.

I have shown in this thesis how as an individual she made a major contribution to housing debates and practice between the 1920s and the 1940s. As an exemplary figure she is important because she stands as someone who demonstrated in her definition of housing as both a material and social entity the translation into practice of a major strand of British social welfare theory, that of Idealism. She also offers a clear case study of the way and extent to which women influenced the creation of the built environment for much of the twentieth century and stands, perhaps, as a model of how we might do so again.

The cross-disciplinary nature of Denby's work also has much to teach us. For design professionals it serves as a reminder of the many aspects which need to be considered in the production of social housing. For historians, architectural historians particularly, it serves as a reminder of the messiness of any historical act, the range of factors which inform the historical process and perhaps suggests that no single discourse should

⁵ Letter from Denby to Lady Pepler, Oct. 1965, in possession of author.

prevail in approaching our subject matter.

It is also worth noting that over the past two years many of the ideas which Denby outlined in the 1930s have re-entered debates about social policy. The present Prime Minister, Tony Blair, speaks constantly of the rights and duties of citizenship. The concept of the 'stakeholder' has strong echoes of the responsible citizens Denby sought to create at Kensal House. Contemporary debates about social regeneration are increasingly focused on the desirability of making inner cities places of work and residency. Brownfield development at high densities - both houses and flats - have all recently been advocated in the housing and architecture press.⁶ All are echoes of the scheme which caused such controversy when Denby first outlined it in 1936.

Denby's ideas and practices could then be seen as a model for both designers and historians. Cross-disciplinarity, and an awareness of both social and material discourses could make for better housing and better histories. Perhaps then, the best note on which to end, and one which could serve as a premise for the future, is to quote something Denby said in 1944. Having described the development of her career she stated that the most important thing she had learnt was:

...that Housing wasn't a question of shelter alone, or even firstly, but a question of reclaiming life - of enriching and enlarging the whole sphere of human activities...⁷

⁶ See, for example, Hattersley (1999), Hetherington (1999) or Hood (1999).

⁷ Denby quoted in Anon (1944).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE:
ELIZABETH DENBY
WRITINGS: 1933-1963

I have prepared this list from my research and from the bibliography assembled by Phyllis Allen in March 1975 for the proposed biography of Denby. Allen seems to have had access to typescripts - especially of letters to the press and some articles - which no longer exist but which she included in her original bibliography as though they were published. I have checked the references she gave but not all these texts are to be found for the dates and locations she listed. I have, however, included them in this bibliography but marked them with an asterisk in order to denote their uncertain status.

1933

- a) "Should Houses cost Less. Builders to find a way", *Daily Telegraph*,
1.3.33 (letter)
- b) "Overcrowded Kensington", *Architectural Review*, 73, 115-118
- c) "Women & Kitchens", *Design for Today*, 1, 113-115
- d) "Housing & the Moyne Report", *The Social Service Review*,
14, 167-72
- e) "In the Kitchen", *Architectural Review*, 74, 199-200
- f) "Poorer Neighbours", *The Times*, 29.4.33, 10 (letter)

1934

- a) "Design in the Kitchen" in J.Gloag (ed), *Design in Modern Life*,
(London, George Allen & Unwin)

- b] Contributor to PEP, *Housing England*, (London, PEP)
- c] "Planning Future Cities, Slum Clearance is no Policy", *Design for Today*, 2, 122-127
- d] "First Report of the Council for Research into Housing Construction", *Architects Journal* (Housing Supplement 4), 80, 937-43
- e] "Review of CRHC Report", *Design for Today*, 2, 270-1
- f] "Community Services", *New Homes for Old*, 1, 28-30*

1935

- a] 'The Role of Organised Services outside the Home in relation to Scientific Management in the Home', in Sixth International Congress for Scientific Management in the Home, *Papers*, (London, P.S.King Ltd)
- b] "Sundecks for Tenements", *Architects' Journal*, 81, 104
- c] "The Designs Reviewed", *Architects' Journal*, 81, 438-440

1936

- a] "New Homes for Old", *The Highway*, 28, 72-76
- b] "Everyday Things for Whom?", *Trend in Design for Everyday Things*, 1, 50-52
- c] "Rehousing from the Slum Dwellers Point of View", *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 44, 61-80
- d] "Rehousing from the Slum Dwellers Point of View", *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 44, 192 (letter)

1937

- a] "Rehousing from the Slum Dwellers Point of View", *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 44, 243 (letter)
- b] "Are we giving Slum-dwellers Home and Surroundings they need?",

Town & County Councillor, I, (no.11), 11-17

c] "Housing and Malnutrition", *The Highway*, 29, 114-115

d] "Planning Moscow", *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 44, 66-67

e] "A European Housing Survey ", *Architectural Review*, 81, 186-189

f] "Kensal House, an Urban Village", *The Phoenix*, June, 11-16

1938

a] 'Kensal House, an Urban Village' in Ascot Gas Water Heaters Ltd, *Flats: Municipal & Private Enterprise*, (London, Ascot Gas Water Heaters Ltd)

b] *Europe Rehoused* , (London, George Allen & Unwin)

c] "An Alternative to Tenements", *The Builder*, 154, 637 (letter)

d] "The Planning Muddle", *The Times*, 27.6.38, 10 (letter)

e] "The Planning Muddle", *The Times*, 7.7.38, 12 (letter)

f] 'Smokeless Housing Schemes', paper given to Public Health Services Congress, no.30, Nov*

1939

a] "Housing in Sweden", *The Listener*, 21, 1302-05

b] "Commonsense about kitchens", *Decoration*, 32, 45-51

1940

a] "untitled", article submitted to *Ideal Home* magazine, 30.3.40*

b] "Factory Sites in Lancashire, Wasteful Use of Land", *The Times*, 14.5.40, 4 (letter)

1941

a] "Plan the Home", *Picture Post*, 10, 21-23

b] "The Woman's Needs", *Country Life*, 90, 870-1

1942

- a] "Pluto & Persephone", *New Statesman & Nation*, 23, 55
- b] "Planning", *New Statesman & Nation*, 23, 93 (letter)
- c] "Pluto & Persephone", *New Statesman & Nation*, 23, 143-144 (letter)
- d] "Using Space to Advantage", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 90, 103-112
- e] 'Using Space to Advantage' in Royal Society of Arts, *The Post-war Home, a series of lectures on its Interior & Equipment*, (London, The Studio)
- f] "Elizabeth Denby", *Architects' Journal*, 96, 6 (letter)
- g] "This is a Modern Building", *Picture Post*, 17, 16-17

1943

- a] 'Problems of Character' in Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our Towns, a Close Up*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press)
- b] "Domestic Planner vs Interior Decorator", *Architectural Review*, 93, 28
- c] "Rural Housing", *The Times*, 19.3.43, 5 (letter)
- d] with others, *Your London has a Plan*, (London, Association of Building Technicians)

1944

- a] "Express Readers dream of home", *Daily Express*, 28.1.44, 2
- b] "The London Family & the London Plan", *The Times*, 19.2.44*
- c] "untitled", letter to *The Times* dated 21.2.44*
- d] "Castles in the Air", *Evening News*, 7.3.44*
- e] "untitled", letter to *The Times* dated 14.3.44*
- f] "Is Prefabrication the Solution of the Housing Shortage", *Evening News*, 28.3.44*

g] "Home & Workplace", *Journal of the Industrial Welfare Society:*
Industrial Welfare & Personnel Management, 26, 44-5

1945

a] "Post-War Housing", *Daily Herald* 1.1.45/2.1.45*

1956

a] 'Oversprawl' in I.Nairn (ed), *Counter Attack against Subtopia*, (London, Architectural Press/ originally *Architectural Review*, 120, December issue)

1957

a] "Stop flogging the Barlow horse", *Architects' Journal*, 125 (14.3.57), 384 (letter)

b] "Planners & Architects", *The Guardian*, 12.4.57, 5

c] "Overspill & Oversprawl", *Keystone*, 39, 2-10

1959

a] "Pioneer of Sociology", *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 66, 179

1962

a] "Wanted, Desirable Residence", *New Society*, 1, no.6, 29

b] " Pulling Down Houses", *New Society*, 1, no. 8, 34 (letter)

1963

a] "A Hope for Housing", *New Society*, 1, no.26, 29

b] "30 Bob's Worth of Housing", *New Society*, 1, no.29, 29 (letter)

APPENDIX TWO:
ELIZABETH DENBY 1894-1965

Chronology

1894	Born in Bradford
1906-13	Attends Bradford Girls Grammar School
1915-16	Secretarial course at Leeds Secretarial School
1916-17	Student at the LSE, awarded Certificate in Social Science
1917-19	Administrative Assistant, Joint Industrial Council Division, Ministry of Labour
1919-21	Subsection Director, Industrial Training Dept, Ministry of Labour
1923-27	Organising Secretary, Kensington Council of Social Service
1925	Secretary, Kensington Housing Association
1927-33	Full-time Secretary of Kensington Housing Association and Trust
1931	First New Homes for Old Exhibition, Westminster Central Hall (December)
1932	Organising Chair of second New Homes for Old exhibition, Building Trades Exhibition, Olympia (September)
1933	Third New Homes for Old exhibition at 24 Grosvenor Place, Westminster (March) Gives 'The Kitchen' talk on BBC series 'Design in Modern Life' (May) Organises special housing exhibition at the Building Centre, (June)

Resigns from Kensington Housing Association/Trust
(October)

Awarded Leverhulme Research Fellowship (October)

Appointed to Architects' Advisory Committee to the Gas,
Light & Coke Company (November)

1934 Consultant to PEP report *Housing England*

Lectures to Manchester DIA on 'Continental Housing
Schemes' (June)

Contributor to fourth New Homes for Old Exhibition
(September)

Opening of R.E.Sassoon House (November)

1935 Ogmore School Camp, south Wales with Wells Coates (June)

1936 Co-founder of House Furnishings Ltd (January)

Chairs discussion 'Elements of Housing' at the Housing
Centre (March)

Exhibitor at 'Architecture by Women' at Building Centre
(April)

House Furnishing Ltd shop opens at 60 Eversholt Street
(April)

Appointed to Council for Art & Industry sub-committee
investigating the furnishing and equipment of the working-
class home (May)

Co-opted onto LCC Housing Committee (July)

Speaks at Garden City and Town Planning Association

Summer School on 'Slum Clearance & Rehousing'

Contributor to fifth New Homes for Old exhibition
(September)

Addresses the RIBA on 'Rehousing from the Slum Dwellers Point of View' (November)

Scheme (unrealised) for an Airman's Hostel in Hatfield with Samuel & Harding (December)

1937 Attends farewell dinner held for Walter Gropius (February)
Kensal House opened (March)

Publication of Council for Art and Industry's *The Working Class Flat: its Furnishing and Equipment* and accompanying exhibition at the Building Centre - Denby contributes to both (June)

Addresses the Housing Centre on 'Housing Standards' (September)

Addresses London section of the National Federation of Housing Societies on 'If we must have flats' (December)

1938 Scheme (unrealised) for a social centre for the North West London Polytechnic with Samuel and Harding (January)
Publication of *Europe Rehoused* (April)

Appointed to Council for Art and Industry sub-committee to furnish the All-Europe House for Ideal Home Exhibition of 1939 (October)

Gives paper on 'Smokeless Housing Schemes' to Public Health Services Congress (November)

1939 Appointed as Adviser on slum clearance schemes by Paddington Borough Council (March)

All-Europe House and plans for mixed-development at Stoke Newington shown at the Ideal Home Exhibition (April-May)

Broadcasts about 'Housing in Sweden' on BBC (June)

- Member of Hygiene Committee of the Women's Group on Public Welfare (November)
- 1940 Delegate to Biennial International Housing Congress, Stockholm
- 1941 Works on Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey (March)
- Member of RIBA Housing Group (June)
- Lectures to the Royal Society of Arts on 'Using Space to Advantage' (December)
- Member of 1941 Committee (subsequently Common Wealth party)
- 1942 Gives evidence to Scott Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas (March)
- Made an Honorary Associate of the RIBA (June)
- Arranges 'Homes to Live in' exhibition for CEMA with Noel Carrington (June)
- Appointed to the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee (July)
- 1943 Contributor to Hygiene Committee of Women's Group on Public Welfare's report *Our Towns, a Close Up* (March)
- 1944 Gives prizes & speech at Bradford Girls Grammar School prize day (January)
- 1945 Appointed Director of Housing to Tarran Industries, Hull
- 1946 Designs a room for the Britain Can Make It exhibition (September)
- 1965 Dies at Hythe

Miscellaneous un-dated activities

Member:

Technical Committee - National Housing & Town Planning Council

Committee of D.I.A.

Governor, Chelsea College of Science & Technology

On executive committee of PEN club

Founder of Watergate Theatre Ltd.

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British Architectural Library, Royal Institute of British Architects

Ove Arup Papers

Edward (Bobby) Carter Papers

Wells Coates Papers

RIBA Archive: women member's committee papers

RIBA Archive: RIBA Council minutes

RIBA Archive: Housing Group papers

Godfrey Samuel Papers

Building Research Establishment Library, Garston

Denby Papers

City of Westminster Archive Centre

Minutes of the Metropolitan Borough of Paddington

Design History Research Centre, University of Brighton

Design Council Archive: Britain Can Make It papers

The Feathers Club Association

Minute books and Annual Reports of the F.C.A.

The Housing Centre Trust

Documents relating to the New Homes for Old Group

Hull City Archives

Documents relating to Tarran Industries

London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham Local History Library

Material relating to Fulham Housing Association

Material relating to the Feathers Club Association

London Borough of Southwark, District Surveyors Department

Files on R.E.Sassoon House

London Metropolitan Archives

Documents relating to London Council of Social Service

Directors' Court Minutes of the Gas, Light and Coke Company

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Committee

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HLG 49 & 50

Papers of the Council for Art & Industry, BT 57

Papers relating to construction of Kensal House, HLG 49

Papers relating to CHAC Sub-Committee on the Design of Flats (Dudley
Committee) HLG 37

Papers relating to the Committee on the Utilisation of Land in Rural Areas (Scott Committee), HLG 80

Papers relating to the Utility Furniture Advisory Committee, BT64

Papers relating to CHAC Sub-Committee on the Social Needs and Problems of People living in flats, HLG 37

Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Central Library (local studies collection)

Records of the Kensington Housing Trust (including the Kensington Council of Social Service and the Kensington Housing Association)

Rachel Alexander papers

North Kensington Women's Welfare Centre

The Feathers Club

Minutes of Borough Council meetings, 1933-1938

Minutes of the Borough Council Housing Committee, 1933-1938

Saint Pancras Housing Association

Documents of the Saint Pancras House Improvement Society

Southwark Local Studies Library

Material relating to the Pioneer Health Centre

Minutes of the Metropolitan Borough of Camberwell

University of Sussex Library

Mass-Observation Archive

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Correspondence

Trevor Chinn (archivist, Gordon Russell Ltd)

Jack Donaldson (Pioneer Health Centre)

Edward Hollamby (architect)

Mary Langman (Pioneer Health Centre)

The Leverhulme Trust

Mary Medd (Crowley) (friend)

Ruth Wright (niece)

Film

Kensal House, (1937); sponsor: BCGA; production company: BCGA
 producer: BCGA; director Frank Sainsbury

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